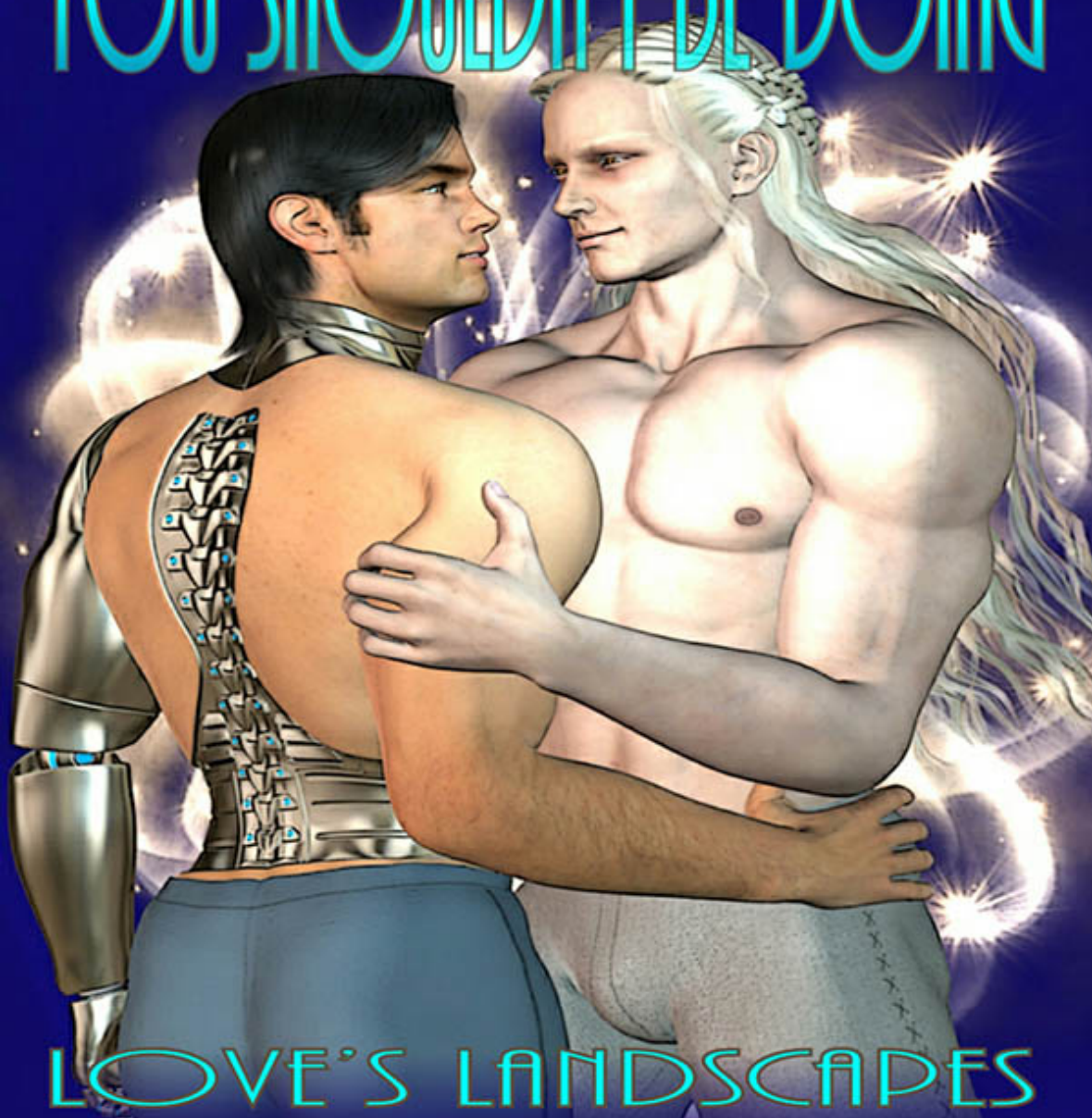


# WAND-LOSING & OTHER THINGS YOU SHOULDN'T BE DOING



LOVE'S LANDSCAPES  
GABBO DE LA PARRA

## **WAND-LOSING & OTHER THINGS YOU SHOULDN'T BE DOING**

The seven city-states of Aletta are facing their first encounter with an off-planet force. It's up to Max Maitheas, governor of the city-state of Anatolia (closest city to the alien landing) to embark on a diplomatic journey to find out the intentions of the interlopers.

Captain Rezzu Ki Muselet leads the first Colviri-Human mission since Nova Gaia, a human planet, became part of the Colviri system. A recognizance mission to a remote planet where they hope to discover signs of life.

What Rezzu wasn't prepared to discover was a thriving civilization and to become mesmerized by the eyes of the head diplomat in charge of receiving them. Green and wonderful like the sky of his home planet.

Both Max and Rezzu have secrets, and in their ability to surpass their deceptions, they might also find love.

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# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## WAND-LOSING & OTHER THINGS YOU SHOULDN'T BE DOING

By Gabbo de la Parra

### Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

### Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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# WAND-LOSING & OTHER THINGS YOU SHOULDN'T BE DOING

By Gabbo de la Parra

## Photo Description

A painting of a handsome man in semi profile, part human part machine, looking at one of his hands. His machine parts and clothes are done in gold, copper and brass tones with clouds resembling cogs in different sizes surrounding him. He wears a top hat adorned with goggles and two feathers, one of a pheasant and the other of a peacock. He's the embodiment of Steampunk imagery.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*Hi. My name is Max. A few hundred years ago my ancestors had the bright idea to turn the barren rock this planet was into a garden. A group of scientists and technicians had a plan which would take generations to create a beautiful ecosystem. It was still just a rock in space back when my many times great-grandparents lost touch with the rest of the universe. I don't know why the supply ships stopped coming, was it a war? Our stories tell how the technicians faced a future in a hostile place with no hope of returning home. They did what humans always do; they survived and changed both themselves and their environment.*

*You may look at me and see something less than human. I look at myself and see a man. I have parents who love me, siblings and cousins who share my life. I have dreams for a future with a special man and maybe children of our own. So what difference does it make that I am as much technology as biology? Does that give these interlopers the right to come here claim our Eden as theirs? They say we are not men, I say we are and that we will fight for our home.*

*And, Author, there is one particular man among the invaders... I can see a future with him. I imagine a life together, and one day, perhaps, children with his beautiful eyes.*

*Dear Author, please, Help me—help us—find our happily ever after.*

*Sincerely,*

*Peggy*

## Story Info

**Genre:** science fiction

**Tags:** steampunk-ish, magic users, screwball space opera, not-what-it-seems, spacemen/aliens, switch/versatile

**Content Warnings:** robotic foreplay

**Word Count:** 32,061

A glossary of terms can be found at the end of the story

# WAND-LOSING & OTHER THINGS YOU SHOULDN'T BE DOING

By Gabbo de la Parra

*Your first comes from the man  
Your second from your hands  
After that your wand would be  
From the trove of the land  
Until your last solution comes  
From your heart...*

~Alettan Nursery Rhyme



## 1. CREATIVITY

“Lairdimax Trean Maitheas!”

*Uh-oh*

People only yelled your entire name when they were ready to berate you. His oldest cousin and mentor, Pasdeotrom Ameri, entered the laboratory chamber, swatting the orange fumes (that were supposed to be blue) like someone having a fight with a swarm of short-circuited trackers.

“How many times do I have to tell you not to take or add anything to the sodding formulas?”

Max swallowed hard. It wasn't his fault he had a creative mind. He was only fifteen, but he'd already finished the AASS (Aealae Artes & Science School) and was ready to enter Diplomacy Center. That was what his parents wanted—for him to be a diplomat. Max wanted to be a Master Developer, to create new artifacts to advance their race and dominate the magic that flowed throughout their planet and was the source of their energy.

Perhaps someday, he could find a way to travel to space and reconnect with the people of their ancestors. Although, he wasn't sure if he wanted to do that because it was important to understand one's past or just to slap the estranged fuckers for abandoning them. Shame that information had been destroyed two hundred years before, during a revolt. Well, nothing was perfect, right?

“Daydreaming again? I swear to Universe, I don't know how in the seven circles of Verju you finished top of your class and ahead by four years.”

*Poor Verju, it wasn't his fault he died in the deepest mine of the planet.*

“It's all in my genes,” Max unnecessarily answered. His mother always told him to inhale and exhale twice before answering and that not all questions needed a response; at least not the rhetorical ones.

“You're aware our mothers are sisters, right?”

“Yes. I operate under the assumption that you, at least, have some smarts in you due to that, and my creativity comes from Father's side.” Max slightly shrugged.

“You insufferable bugger. The only thing saving you from a beating is that you're my favorite cousin.”

“And that if I do well, your program will catch and more pupils will come to your hands, and their parents’ moneys to your chests.”

“This isn’t about profit. It’s about learning.” Trom shook his leonine mane. He was tall and broad; anyone would think he was a military man, not a Master Alchemist.

Max had the suspicion there were concoctions involved in his cousin’s girth since he didn’t have any mechanical enhancements like many men who wanted to be bigger and more menacing. Trom had gone the subtle way, the biological way. One could totally change a couple of components on a healing formula and turn it into a growth serum; you just needed to do it the right way and KABOOM, you became a mountain of muscles.

Trom snapped his fingers in Max’s face. “Hey, am I talking to myself here?”

“Oh. No. What were you saying?”

“Don’t add cyanide to my dispatching draught again or *you’re* gonna get dispatched next time.”

*Yeah, like he could afford to kill a Maitheas.*

Pain hit Max on his chest. It was Trom’s closed fist holding something. “Trago was running with this in its mouth. Pay attention where you *leave* your wand, you don’t need to lose another!”

*Shit.*

\*\*\*\*

*Five years later...*

Max skidded to a halt in front of the giant, ominous doors. He wasn’t that late; he still had an entire standard minute to spare. The two man-statues guarding the doors looked at him reprovngly, their mouths tight, obviously forcing themselves to conceal the reprimand ready to flourish on their lips.

After four long terms, Max had finally done it. His Diplomat Certification awaited him behind these stupidly huge doors. He could have done it in three of the five normal years, but he and his big mouth went and told a teacher to *shut it and shove it* and gifted himself with a year of suspension. Good thing he didn’t smack the idiot—that would have meant expulsion, and the litany from his parents would have never ceased.

One mechanical arm (just a little too much nitroglycerin in that formula), two boyfriends (it all started fine then the guys smothered him), and eight

wands (people needed to watch where they stepped, right?) later, he was ready to go on his own with his certification and all the diplomatic knowledge of the world in one suitcase and a leather-bound book full of formulas and device blueprints in another.

The council was sending him to Anatolia, one of the seven city-states of the planet and seemingly the furthest from their federal capital, Perselia. It didn't matter to him, the longer the distance the better.

*Now, let's politely nod at the mean muggin', cardboard faces of the Granting Committee.*

Well, that—if he moved his behind and entered the chamber. He straightened his morning jacket, fixed his top hat. He inhaled and exhaled (twice), stepping on the right place. The troglodyte doors slid open with a bored hiss.

*Like everything in this place.*

“You are late.”

That wasn't an abnormal greeting, not by a long shot.

“I apologize, your high—” Max cleared his throat, taking his hat off, “—Sir.”

The four men exchanged glances. The Head of the Granting Committee spoke. Although they were almost close to the ceiling of the chamber, his booming voice didn't need any amplification. “You are irreverent and a supreme pain in all our posteriors—”

*Your flabby, hanging asses, yeah, I know.*

“—but you are also brilliant, with a quick mind when it can focus on something long enough.” Bobbing heads from the others expressed their approval of the Head's words. “You are a promising young man, and we hope that your behavior as an adult grows parallel to your intellect. We know you will do great things for our beloved Alleta, helping us to deal with the turbulent currents of political dissention between the cities of this planet. Lairdimax Trean Maitheas, we hereby confer you the Diplomat Certification and assign you as chief assistant of Anatolia's governor. Behave and make us proud.”

To the left of the Head, the man with the least mean muggin' face uttered the Alletan farewell. “May there always be water to slake your thirst, shade to protect your eyes, and nourishment to maintain your body.”

Those words spoke of a time when Aletta was a desolate rock full of hidden resources, and their ancestors struggled to make it a garden, abandoned by the people that brought them here but willing to survive and thrive. Words that always sent a chill down Max's spine. He would not let the city-states destroy each other and all they have accomplished as a race in the aftermath.

"I'll make this committee and Diplomacy Center proud. Thank you, my lords." Max bowed. When he righted his body, he grinned to the man who had recited the farewell.

*Love you, Dad.*

The Head of the Granting Committee cleared his throat, his eyes narrowing, "By the way. Please, no more pet machines."

*Ouch.*

\*\*\*\*

*And five more years later...*

"Don't you look dapper?"

Max groaned. His beautiful mother, Auspeggireh Maitheas (Peggy to her closest ones) fussed over him.

"Oh, stop it. You're the youngest governor ever appointed, and all that before you even reached your twenty-fifth birthday."

"*Mom*, the appointment was two days ago, and my birthday is today. You can hardly say it was before I was twenty-five."

"Now, now, dates are dates, and the record would say you were twenty-four, it doesn't matter if you became older two days after." She dusted his shoulders. "All right, everybody is waiting for you. Come on. Don't be shy, Lord Governor."

All his loved ones were here amid politicians and outstanding citizens. Tanned and lanky Iontach, the oldest of his brothers, played with the ends of his handlebar mustache with one hand and grabbed his wife's waist with the other. Stout Fiore, second brother and a savvy entrepreneur, didn't have much luck with the ladies, but he didn't seem to care. The twins Sasta and Amhara, older than Max by two standard years were incredible, strong defense teachers. He had endured a lot of *training* from them, but (in the end) it had been all worth it, he knew how to fight, especially dirty. His favorite cousin Meidhre, the woman every man fantasized about. His best friend Deas, the light to his darkness, blond like the sun and with a disarming smile that had made more

than one girl lose her virtue. Even Trom was here, older but wide like a bull, still teaching Alchemy with great success.

Maith Maitheas, his father, hugged him. “So proud of you, son, youngest governor ever and haven’t lost a wand in a standard year.”

Max chuckled. It wasn’t like wand-losing was a joke, but it happened to him a lot, and his family playfully reminded him of it (at nearly every opportunity they had). He patted his pocket to be sure it was there. Master Esaw had told him that the next time he needed a wand the core must be something *from his other half* because all other possibilities had been exhausted after twenty wands.

*So I better be careful with this one. I’ve already exhausted the **trove** of the planet.*

Hopefully, he wouldn’t need a replacement. An Alletan without his wand to wield the magic emanating from their planet was worse than a pariah. In his case, his political position and the honor of his family would be irreparably damaged if he couldn’t secure the Alletans’ only vehicle to conduit this fabulous power of their world. Yes, there were some like him who could control it with their bare hands, but this ability was publicly shunned and secretly feared. Thus, he was doing his best to pay attention and not lose this one. The story of a woman dismembered by an enraged mob when they discovered she could do magic without her wand had been knocking on his brain door of late, perhaps because he was at the end of his rope. Although it happened so long ago, it wasn’t worth the worry.

Well, he could always say he was in love with Luddi, his pet peacock, and use one of his feathers like last time.

*And the magic will blow a raspberry in your face for being a ridiculous liar.*

True. He couldn’t just say that someone or something was *his other half*. The notion had to come from his heart, from his very essence for it to resonate with the magic and therefore the wand could become the perfect vehicle. Even as capable as Max was to control this power with exceptional success barehanded, he couldn’t be the ultimate conduit without that extension of his being a wand provided.

“Still here, Governor? You have another two hundred guests to mingle with.” His father smacked him on the back, and the riotous laugh made several heads swivel their way.

Another heavy hand struck Max almost immediately, making the gears of his spine whir noisily in protest. Fiore pulled him sideways to his corpulent, mechanical chest and shook him gleefully, “Dear little brother, youngest governor. What about that, huh? I knew you were going to rise fast, but this is pleasantly unexpected.” Turning Max to face him, Fiore did a flourish with his wand, and an outrageous gold necklace and medallion appeared below Max’s collar, resting heavily over his sternum where his lifelight was concealed by shirt and waistcoat. “There. Happy birthday!”

It looked like something one would receive as an order of merit, truly gaudy and excessive, but that was Fiore for you. And now Max would have to wear the well-intended but not-fashionable-at-all gift through the night. “Why, thank you, brother. This is exactly what I needed to complement my ensemble. It’s exquisite.”

*Liar, liar pants on fire a.k.a. diplomat without remorse.*

“Perfect, isn’t it?” Fiore clapped his hands like a kid who had just received a badge of honor.

His father eyed the necklace with a perfect mask of approval in place; the astonishment was just a pinprick on his dutifully schooled features. It took a diplomat to recognize the telltales of another. “One in a million,” he offered, full of mirth.

It wasn’t that they didn’t love Fiore, they did, and he was a devoted son and brother. Precisely because of this, there was no reason to break his heart by telling him the gift was atrocious.

The twins hurried to them. “It’s time.” And both towed Max away from his father and brother, pulling him by the armpits and snorting at the sight of the flashy necklace.

“Ladies, a little more respect. I’m a governor now. We’re not at a family affair.”

“Oh shut up,” growled Sasta in his ear. “You might be a big shot official, but we can still kick your ass—”

Amhara finished the sentence, “—privately and publicly.”

Max almost rolled his eyes. He did his best not to appear a burlap sack full of potatoes between his burly sisters. Their mechanical enhancements were *cosmetic*, not like Max’s, which were all the products of his urge for experimentation and creation. Anyone would say that someone with such a

heavy hand on the pacification of the animosity between the city-states (which is why Anatolia made him governor after his predecessor decided to retire) could not have time to experiment and create, but he needed more than politics in his life, and since men were proving to be more nuisance than gaiety, his imaginative efforts were his only solace.

“Hey,” one of his sisters jolted him. “Pay attention.”

They were in the center of the hall, and Max saw Peggy Maitheas graciously swing her wand, all the lights slowly dimming. Unos, his pet ball, floated into the hall with an enormous birthday cake on top of him. All his gears, recently polished for the occasion, twinkled thanks to the tiny candle flames.

Those assembled sang, “For he’s a jolly good fellow, for he’s a jolly good fellow...”

“STOP.” Inall Brix, Max’s assistant, skidded to a halt, dangerously close to Unos and the cake. “Governor, this is an emergency!” He was out of breath and uncharacteristically disheveled; he had probably tried to find a solution for whatever the situation was on his own and couldn’t. “A spaceship has just landed outside the city gates by the Yerma plains!” His hands rested on his knees as he heaved, searching for oxygen. “I sent a battalion, but you need to come.”

After a collective gasp, all eyes landed on Max. His sisters let go of him (they had been clutching him like he was going to run or something), and he straightened his jacket. With a quick flick of his wand, he made his hat appear and fixed it in place, slightly sideways as was his custom. Once again Fate was about to force him to use his only ability that wasn’t a natural part of him—diplomacy. He strode toward Inall, scooped some icing as he passed beside the cake, tasting it (*mmm, really good*), and spoke aloud with his diplomat face firmly in place, “Let’s do this.”

\*\*\*\*\*

## 2. REWARDS

*Feathers like eyes*

*Metal and flesh*

*Unruly heart*

*Virtuous mage*

“Imploding black holes!” Rezzu Ki Muselet grumbled. His father chuckled quietly as the priest transmitting the oracle’s message narrowed his eyes disapprovingly. “Forgive me, *Dre*.” He added quickly and quietly. “I appreciate your time and effort. Please bless me.”

“Go with the blessing of Meha, my child.”

Father and son bowed and left the chamber, walking out of the temple in a straight line and simply nodding politely to those they encounter.

“I’m going to end up with a machine covered in feathers!”

“A *virtuously magical* machine covered in feathers...” The amusement in his father’s tone was clear as the cloudless, pale green sky of Mireeh above them. “Your father also threw a fit when the oracle told him his. I’m not that bad, am I?”

Darien Wanao, the father in front of him, was human. Kekoa Muselet, his other father, was a Colviri prince of the blood, and they were perfect for each other. Rezzu could only hope he had such luck. “If you were better, you’d be a god, Father.”

“Don’t ever let DRE-Han Ki hear you say something like that.”

DRE-Han Ki was a nasty codger priest who needed to mind his own business. Rezzu nodded judiciously though. His father arched an eyebrow, probably reading his mind and smelling his deception. He grinned, “Never, Father.”

“Let that riddle out of your mind. Tomorrow is a great day for you, your first mission as captain. I’m so proud of you.”

Rezzu had heard the last phrase at least a thousand times throughout the last standard month. Yes, this was *his* first mission as captain after being first officer for almost five standard years, but it was also (and most importantly) the



first Human-Colviri joint mission. They were going to a remote planet where they hoped to discover signs of life. He had come to his position as captain through hard work, but the chances of something going wrong were always a possibility, especially in uncharted territory, like combining two races that get along well but had never had the opportunity to embark on a journey such as this together.

“Uncle Sule and Uncle Alaric aren’t coming, huh?”

“I’m sorry, Rezzu.” His father said in common language, because the Colviri would apologize but they were never sorry. Feeling sorry was an excuse to keep doing the same error. “They are tied in procedures with the Courts.”

“Well, I’ll see them when I get back.” He loved those two men. They were regents of Nova Gaia, a planet the Cygnus Federation had ruled until they lost a war with the Colviri and ceded it. His uncles were humans, as was half of the population of the blue sphere. It was one of the first places where the Colviri intermingled with other races, after being voluntarily isolated for eons without any interest regarding the galaxy.

“I know you’ll face this adventure with their blessings upon you.” His father squeezed his shoulder and shook him lightly. “Ready for some food?”

Five standard days later, Rezzu stood in an ornate chamber with high windows, looking at a darkening sky, his hands clasped behind his back. It was weird to not see the three moons of Nova Gaia or the rings of asteroids of Mireeh, his home planet. Only myriad stars shone above him.

Another man was with him, the governor of Anatolia, the closest city to the place where they had landed. Rezzu had to give it to this man; they were together for a drink after the governor had told everyone to fuck off with a pleasant and subtle demeanor because he was not going to be secretive about this encounter at the end of the many meetings of the day. Rezzu had yet to understand the purpose of this rendezvous though.

“Pan Rezzu,” Lairdimax Maitheas called him softly. “Your drink.” He had addressed Rezzu in the way Colviri addressed each other, using ‘Pan’ as a symbol of respect.

The mechanical arm and hand didn’t unnerve Rezzu; he had seen machine prosthesis before. It was the way those green eyes, so similar to the sky of Mireeh, studied him. Hidden behind caution and diplomacy was something Rezzu couldn’t name and didn’t dare try to understand. Both enigmas made

him uncomfortable. He just wasn't sure if it was a totally unpleasant kind of discomfort.

Instead of thanking the governor (Max, the governor had requested to be called) as he took the flute, Rezzu uttered the stupidest thing that had ever come out of his mouth. "You speak common language, but you have a funny accent." That was not just impolite but extremely childish. People were entitled to have accents, they made life richer and interesting.

More than offended, Max seemed amused. "No. *You* have a funny accent."

"Hey, my uncle Sule was the one who taught me, and he is human and was a military teacher." Rezzu didn't know how those details made a case for the purity of his common language. There was something about this half-machine man that constantly short-circuited his brain. Perhaps it was those lips. The governor had a cruel mouth. Cruel in its beauty and in all the desires it stirred in Rezzu with a simple smile. Desires that weren't appropriate, that weren't reasonable. A bad thing when dealing with new people, especially if you wanted them to become your allies.

Green scopes scrutinized his face. Max's head was slightly tilted to one side; he wasn't wearing his hat, and his hair was as dark as the coming night. "You said *my uncle* and *human* in the same breath. As much as the Colviri have human features and similar bodies, one look at any of you, and we know that if we ever shared a common ancestor it must have been at the beginning of time." There was no recrimination in his tone, just logical and dispassionate understanding.

"He's not my uncle by blood, but I love him all the same. My father *is* human though." Something no one here would guess at first sight, since Rezzu had the Colviri's natural lack of melanin in his hair and skin and the height, usually beyond seven feet; although the Alettans were uncharacteristically tall for humans, perhaps due to the enhancements they favored so much. Nevertheless, Rezzu had his human father's eyes, a vibrant hazel hue that was unnatural for his race, but that might not be that surprising on this planet.

"So your mother is Colviri." Max said it like a fact not a question.

"I have two fathers." Rezzu used the same matter-of-fact tone.

"We have artificial procreation too, nothing esoteric about it." Max almost shrugged but stopped himself. He raised his hand at face level and moved his brass fingers in a wavy motion, as if testing their flexibility. "We can't depend on Nature alone."

“Love can push Nature, pan Max.” Rezzu murmured and took a swig of his drink. It was a strong and burning liquor. He shouldn't have more.

“Love can push many things,” Max offered inscrutably.

Rezzu needed to get out of this room before he said (or did) another stupid thing. “I think I'm ready for bed.”

Which could be taken in many different ways.

Max's eyes misted, and he arched a manly dark eyebrow. “Me too...” He sobered up, instantly apologetic. “We should call it a night.”

“Yes, we must.” Rezzu settled his flute on a nearby table. “Good night.”

Rezzu Ki Muselet, captain of the *Oculus* and de facto ambassador of the Colviri, hurried toward the door without looking back.

*I'm a mess.*

Just his luck that the planet was actually inhabited and he had ended up representing his people without the extended diplomatic experience necessary to deal with a thriving society instead of the desolate, abandoned site they had expected.

His two escorts waited outside the room, eyeing suspiciously the two soldiers installed at the entrance while they kept watch from the opposite wall. The people of Aletta seemed friendly, but it was wise to keep one's guard up. They walked him outside the Palace of Government and boarded their transport.

Rezzu should have braided his long hair that morning. Now it whirled disorderly about him in the warm wind of Anatolia's outskirts as the transport sped toward their ship. Rezzu's mind was a tumultuous reflection of the chaos around his head—admonitions and cravings tossed and turned, fighting and embracing. He was here on a peace mission, not to lust after some politician, no matter how hot that politician was. By Meha, he was a soldier; the subtleties of diplomacy escaped him, and the governor of Anatolia *had disturbed* him from the moment they laid eyes on each other, at what the Alletans called the Yerma Plains, the previous day. True, they hadn't come to invade the planet, and precisely because of this—to avoid unnecessary panic among the Alettans, the queen decided not to send another ship with seasoned representatives (upon discovering how advanced the planet was) but to exploit Rezzu's military wherewithal and summarily turn him into the poster boy for the Colviri.

Maybe he was just horny, and that was why Max's beauty bewildered him.

*My mistake for only focusing on my career and leaving the needs of my body to hazard.*

Apparently, what he needed was physical release to be able to focus on a sensible course of action, and it was solely in his hands. As captain he was determined to keep his hands off the crew, but he wasn't sure if he would be able to keep the same resolution concerning a certain man with starless night hair, eyes like the sky of home, and a sultry, cruel mouth.

\*\*\*\*

### 3. AWARENESS

“You shouldn’t be doing this.” Max’s best friend in the whole world, Deas, had his reprimand face on.

“And what am I doing exactly?”

“You think I haven’t seen how you look at that Colviri.”

“What? Are you crazy? They probably want to invade us and are just assessing our defenses and power.” He just said this to deflect Deas, but so far the Colviri hadn’t been able to explain quite clearly why they came to Aletta.

*My diplomat gut tells me it is not an annexation.*

Whatever it was, it had a subtle aroma of shame, and that was what made it hard for them to come straight forward with their intentions. Their own remorse held them back—but why?

Deas arched an eyebrow, which meant, *yeah right*.

“Besides, you are well aware I think men are a waste of time. Everything is nice when it begins and then goes to the toilet because it gets possessive and clingy and smothering.”

Although in his heart of hearts, Max hoped to find the right man and fall in love and live happily ever after with a bunch of mini geniuses like him for progeny.

*’Verse, not even the twins have this kind of girly dreams. Well, there’s nothing girly about those two anyway.*

“I still don’t approve if you’re planning on doing something reckless.” Deas crossed his arms over his chest and huffed.

All right, there was something seriously wrong here because usually the one doing the huffing was Max. “There’s something else. What’s going on?”

“Have you seen how they look at us? At our enhancements? Like we’re less human because we have robotic parts.”

“Really?” If this was true, Max needed to pay more attention. People feared what they didn’t understand, and what you feared you began to hate and soon you’d be wanting to destroy it. And Deas would know, his company was the one catering to the visitors, and he had more spies than Max everywhere. “It’s

not our fault that our ancestors had to enhance themselves to survive. It's our tradition to replace and enhance body parts with technology."

"True. But you haven't detected the interlopers' discomfort because you only have eyes for that Captain."

"Their ambassador." Max pointed out.

"Whatever he is. I mean, I've noticed this dislike toward us more in the humans with them, but it's all the same. They are together." Deas' face darkened.

"Then I was right when I advised everyone to keep their magic to themselves. If they seem afraid of the way we look, imagine their distress in learning we wield supernatural forces in our everyday lives."

"If they stay here long enough, they'll find out." Deas said with a scathing note in his usually smoky voice.

"We'll ease them into it. You always need an ace up your sleeve." Max grinned.

Unos floated about them, playing soft music. Max stroked him, and his tubes changed colors happily. If he hadn't been using his sound reproduction system to entertain them, he would have clicked and chittered and purred in delight before thanking Max. It would be a nice improvement to change the frontal gears for bigger ones so they looked more like eyes. Unos was a ball, but that didn't mean he couldn't have a nice face, you know—like a metallic, chubby friend.

"I swear to Universe, Max. How could you stay in meetings for so many hours when you cannot even concentrate on a simple conversation?"

Max gave a slight shrug. "You know we have stenographers to record things, right?"

"That doesn't mean your mind can be wandering while others talk."

"You're absolutely correct. I'm going to invite Ambassador Muselet to The One Thousand Ball and wring the truth out of him as we dance."

"You have got to be shitting me!"

"Of course not. The other cities have given me free rein over our dealings with the visitors. What better way to engage them than in a ball. It would be a formal welcome for them. Yes! It's a brilliant idea. I have to send the haberdasher to him to furnish a proper outfit. This is exciting."

“I don’t trust these aliens.” Deas grumbled, sounding exactly like a very pissed child, his blue eyes flashing with disapproval.

The music stopped. “Governor, a calling from Captain Muselet has been redirected to me.”

Deas’ eyebrow hiked up a few millimeters.

“Hush,” Max mouthed to his friend. “Let him through, Unos.”

The Colviri ambassador’s holographic body appeared on top of Unos. Even in miniature, it was imposing, powerful, and did things it shouldn’t be doing to Max’s pulse. He didn’t want a man messing with his peace, but he surely wouldn’t mind messing with the ambassador’s wicked body for a spell.

“Hello, Max.” The Colviri captain noticed Deas. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to interrupt you.”

“You didn’t. This is my friend Teremideas Walker.”

“Nice to meet you,” Rezzu bowed slightly.

“The pleasure is all mine.” Deas had his polite face on and acknowledged the captain with an inclination of his head and a gallant (and utterly false) smile.

Since Max knew all the inward faces Deas was making, he went business-like. “How can I help you, Ambassador?”

“Can we talk?”

“Of course, Ambassador. My office, in twenty standard minutes?”

Rezzu glanced at Deas before speaking. “We could use a less formal setting.”

“Very well, West Gardens, same time,” Max smiled, Rezzu’s hesitation was endearing.

“Thank you.” And with an elegant bow the hologram dissolved.

“I don’t like it.” Deas growled, going to his feet.

“Sweet ’verse. If I didn’t know better I’d think you have something stuck up your butt gears.”

Deas sputtered, “What? You know I don’t...”

“Shhhh,” Max stood up and patted Deas’s cheek. “I know your pretty behind is all flesh. Why don’t you go and have some fun with it, instead of worrying about me?”

“You’re insufferable sometimes.”

“That I’ve been told.”

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*Twenty-five standard minutes later...*

A bird flew onto a high branch. It must be a bird because it had feathers like the doves Rezzu had seen on Nova Gaia. They didn’t have birds on Mireeh. It was a blue, green and orange thing with a long tail and a fancy crown. He asked Max what it was.

“It’s a peacock. Want to see him closer?”

“Sure.” What else could he say?

“Luddi!” Max had his hands around his mouth to make the sound go further. “Come here, boy!”

“Is he a pet?”

“Yes. He’s very smart.” And to prove it, the bird gracefully flew from his branch and landed in front of them. “Well, done, Luddi. This is my friend Rezzu.” Max put his hand over Rezzu’s shoulder. Lightning traveled through his arm, but Rezzu remained outwardly impassive. “Give him a show, big boy,” Max cooed.

Luddi shook, similar to a man loosening his shoulders before a race. His long tail rose and spread like a fan. It was one of the most beautiful things Rezzu had ever seen. The colors, the forms, all were regal and impressive. Luddi started to strut, a performer on stage. And then Rezzu realized with a shock that Luddi’s tail feathers resembled eyes.

***Feathers like eyes.***

*Nah. Sweet Lady of the Shields, help me focus.*

After a moment, Max stepped close to the beautiful bird. “He wouldn’t let anyone else do this.” He took a feather from the tail and offered the jewel-like marvel to Rezzu. “Would you try some hats? If you find one that you like, we can furnish it with this.”

“For The One Thousand Ball?”

“Well, yes. You can’t have the perfect outfit without the perfect hat.”

Rezzu shouldn’t have been enjoying Max’s smile so much. Everything in this man was delightful, even the way his hat rested a little sideways over his



dark locks. "I've never worn a hat before, and we usually don't wear so many pieces at once."

"You don't go around naked, do you?" But the way Max eyed him said he'd like the idea of Rezzu roaming around unclothed very much.

And something in Rezzu wanted to please him very much too. Maybe he was getting sick from the lack of mirium in the air. It was a lame excuse. Nova Gaia didn't have mirium in its atmosphere and Rezzu was always fine there. It has to be another thing; he just couldn't name it—yet. It couldn't still be horniness after all the attention his hands had given to his cock. "No, we don't." He looked for a topic that didn't involve thinking of the governor undressed too. "Tell me more about this ball. What does it celebrate?"

"It's a commemoration. The One Thousand are those who were left stranded here, founders of our culture. This planet was a desert, and with sweat, blood, and tears they built a future for themselves and their children. We are proud of our heritage, of those miners, technicians, scientists. You might still see a lot of arid zones, but what we've conquered we made into heavenly gardens."

It was true, the grass was emerald green, luscious trees, sparkling flowers. Tall, graceful, stone buildings and ample squares adorned their city. Rezzu wondered about their energy sources. He hadn't seen panels for it to be solar; nor visible blades, slats or sails pointing to wind force. There were no gas emissions. The technology might seem to some outmoded, but there was something nostalgic about it, perhaps hinting at a time when things were simpler, more in tune with their surroundings. He shook his head and set the evasive energy aside; it wasn't relevant in this precise moment.

Rezzu would say the weather was somewhat stuffy to be wearing so many clothes though. His uniform was insulated, so he only felt it in his face and hands, but, still, he would rather be shirtless like he could in the nice weather of Mireeh. Although on Nova Gaia, people had the same layer-upon-layer dress code going on.

Out of nowhere, Max produced seeds and gave them to Rezzu, "Here. He'll let you feed him if you are with me."

Max must be really quick with his hands because Rezzu didn't see him get those seeds from his pocket. Nah, the governor's presence just made him nervous, and he was blowing simple things out of proportion. They have prestidigitators both in Mireeh and Nova Gaia, sleight of hand wasn't that an extraordinary thing. It just took him by surprise.

Was the governor waiting for Rezzu to comment on it?

For some reason he couldn't quite fathom, Rezzu decided it was better to not mention it. It had been so casual, it didn't seem to be intentional. Usually when people had that kind of skill, they bragged about it.

"Don't be afraid, Ambassador. He won't bite." Max was smiling, using the kind of smile that made Rezzu want to run and never stop, even before knowing what he was running from.

"Hey, Luddi, want some of these?" Rezzu asked as naturally as his conflicting nerves allowed his voice to come out, extending his hand toward the bird.

The peacock looked at him quizzically for a heartbeat or two, his head sideways, as if he was taking the measure of Rezzu. He apparently decided Rezzu wasn't dangerous (or that he could take Rezzu down if needed) and moved confidently to pick from his hand.

Rezzu had mentally braced himself for the pain of the sharp looking beak, but the action was surprisingly smooth, and accomplished without a single puncture. A movement made him look from Luddi to Max, and he found the governor appraising him greedily. The strange sensation spiraling inside him wasn't completely unwelcome.

*Your pet won't bite me, but what about you, Governor?*

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## 4. INHERENT

With the ball in full swing, and after all the appropriate rounds of introduction and mingling, Max finally had Rezzu Ki Muselet to himself, at least for a while until some plump old lady requested him for a dance. He needed to get the ambassador away from the party for a spell.

*No. Not that kind of spell.*

“I haven’t had the opportunity to show you the Palace of Government properly with one thing and another. Would you care for a tour? I can see the party is a little overwhelming for you.”

Rezzu sipped his Calvados. “You said this brandy is made from apples?”

“Yes, we don’t have grapes in Aletta, but we love our liquors. So we improvised.” Max smiled. In Aletta, they would make liquors out of rocks if they could. One thing magic couldn’t do was transform minerals into wine; the chemistry was just not right.

“It’s delicious.” Rezzu almost moaned after a bigger pull. “Let’s have that tour.”

Empty glasses found the tray of a passing helper, and Max took fresh drinks for them both. He gave a last look at the revelers below them. Couples twirled, jewels sparkled, and the Colviri among them were not necessarily the biggest people in the room (with so many members of the Alettan community brutally enhanced), but they stood out by their long, alabaster hair and their refusal to wear hats. Rezzu was the only one who had accepted the challenge, and he didn’t force his people to follow his lead. The humans among his party were mostly from a planet called Nova Gaia, and their customs and wardrobe were uncannily similar; thus they blended easily (at least physically) with the Alettans. Max hadn’t seen the discomfort Deas mentioned, but they were at a party; drink and food always softened recalcitrant hearts for a while.

They moved away from the balcony. Max led the way, still in awe of how dapper Rezzu looked in his brocade tailcoat, navy blue waistcoat, cravat and trousers, and velvet top hat. “Please follow me.”

Luddi’s feather had influenced the decision for the paisley design and tones of Rezzu’s coat, and the blues and greens made his single white braid shimmer like the long tail of an ivory stallion. The darkness of the hat made his sun-like

eyes more radiant, more intriguing. For someone who claimed never to have worn a hat before, he was carrying it with flying colors. In contrast, Max wore red and black brocade with burgundy waistcoat and cravat, and black trousers.

“I haven’t complimented you on your outfit. The burgundy brings out the color of your eyes.” Rezzu smiled shyly.

“You’re most gracious, pan Rezzu.” The right thing to do would be to comment on Rezzu’s appearance too, but Max chose a different road. “I hope I’m not imposing, but I’d love to wear one of your uniforms. I haven’t been in a uniform in a long time.”

“You’ll look magnificent.”

“I’m not as big as you, Ambassador.”

“But you’re bigger than most humans in my crew. I’ll see that you receive one uniform tomorrow.” Rezzu grinned and winked. “Then we can get together to see how it fits.”

“A brilliant idea.”

They were supposed to be touring the palace, but they only had eyes for each other. The sound of music was becoming fainter and fainter, the distant reminder that there was a ball in progress. Other couples moved amid the marble and stone corridors, decorated with blue and silver rugs, notables’ paintings, delicate vases, and ornate sconces. A playful idea came to Max, as he realized where they were heading. “Let me show you the Weapon’s Room.”

“That would be nice.” Rezzu settled the drink he had already finished on the tray of a smiling helper.

Max opened the door, hoping nobody was already there. The ball was approaching that moment where people would start looking for places to indulge. He wasn’t planning exactly that, but—he needed Rezzu all alone, against his better judgment. He patted his coat to check for his wand; he’d used a reducing enchantment to make it fit in the tiny pocket because if he’d left it somewhere else it was good-bye, and he couldn’t afford that.

The room was empty of revelers. On the walls and in the display cases were a collection of souvenirs from a time when every mineral on the planet had been forged into a sword or an axe or any other ancient weapon with wicked cutting edges to test its capabilities. Among the founders were several individuals who had learned the ancient art of metal forging and passed it on;

thus, in every generation someone had created some decorative and unnecessary combat whatnot.

Moving straight toward the liquor cabinet, Max asked, “Calvados?”

“Isn’t it dangerous to have spirits in a room full of sharp objects?”

“Do you know it is not polite to answer a question with another?” Coming from Max the sole idea was ridiculous; he was the most questioning person in Anatolia, if not Aletta.

Rezzu seemed pleasantly buzzed but answered with an arched eyebrow and a disarming smile. “Isn’t that a question?”

“Touché.”

The ambassador chuckled, waving his finger at Max, “I know that word.”

“I’m glad you do, pan Rezzu.” Max put the glass with two measures of brandy in Rezzu’s hand. The program wasn’t to get the Colviri captain drunk, but it was too tempting seeing the slight coloring emerging on his high cheeks. He followed the sensual movement of the covered Adam’s apple as Rezzu took a healthy gulp.

Those unnatural eyes were heavy-lidded and uncannily trained on Max. “You’re a very handsome man.” Rezzu put his free hand over his chest. “I don’t mean to be disrespectful. I just want to let you know what I think.”

“I applaud frankness, Ambassador.” Max raised his glass in a salute and took a sip. He moved away from Rezzu toward a wall full of elaborate rapiers and knives. The Colviri followed him.

“We’re alone. You can call me Rezzu.” He stopped a few inches from Max but loomed all the same. “Would you tell me what you think of me?”

“I don’t think anything... Rezzu.” Max moved closer and stared into those maddening eyes. “You haven’t done anything to make me think yet.” He noticed how Rezzu swallowed hard.

“You must, at least, have an opinion.” Rezzu had his lips a hairsbreadth from Max’s.

Movement caught his eye, and Max sidled to investigate, leaving Rezzu in an awkward position, tilted over a founder’s bust—almost kissing it. He knew he was being obnoxious to the extreme, and, internally, he wanted to undress Rezzu like he hadn’t wanted anything in a long time. But, if he truly sought to

unveil the things he needed to learn from this man the only way was to play hard to get and push him to reveal his secrets in an effort to win Max over.

Through the gilded mirror, Max saw Inall, his assistant, right beside another man (one he didn't recognize), both on their knees, worshipping the abundantly leaking cock of a Colviri officer, perched on the edge of a desk.

"Annauk and Dominik," Rezzu murmured beside Max.

"The human is from your crew?"

"The one without, what do you call them, enhancements? Dominik." Rezzu had left his drink somewhere and had both hands on either side of the mirror, utterly... something—Max didn't know if Rezzu was shocked by the discovery or impressed by the men's sucking skills.

Inall had shoulder length, fiery red hair and blue eyes, while Dominik's curly, sandy-blond hair looked lovely about his ears with those big, brown eyes. Like all Colviri, Annauk's hair was white (he was noteworthy by wearing it in short spikes. Something Max hadn't seen before), and his eyes were closed, enraptured as he was in the others' ministrations, slowly threading his hands in both sets of locks. The one thing visible, though, was his unruly pubic hair; it shone like the fur of a feral cat, and must be utterly fragrant by the way Dominik and Inall kept nuzzling it every time they went down the thick shaft in perfect synchrony, one on each side.

Rezzu loosened his cravat. "Can they see us? They steal glances our way."

"They only see their own reflection. On that side, this is a full length mirror."

"Oh," Rezzu closed his eyes and tipped his head back as Max's mechanical hand settled on his shoulder. "It's hot here, isn't it?"

"Yes," Max whispered and helped Rezzu out of his tailcoat, caressing muscles in a completely unnecessary way for the action.

One moment later, both coats rested on the floor on top of each other, possibly mimicking the road their owners would follow if Max didn't control the urgency rapidly filling him.

By now, the roles in the other room had reversed. However, Annauk wasn't sucking cocks but taking care of willing holes, after positioning both men over the desk on all fours. Max couldn't see their faces, and yet, by the way their bodies bucked and they pushed into the Colviri's face and digits, they were enjoying themselves greatly.

Max aimed his covered erection sideways to Rezzu's upper leg, and (without questioning himself) unbuttoned the strained placard of the ambassador. "Beautiful, aren't they?"

"Extremely," Rezzu moaned as he, perhaps unconsciously, centered himself over Max's bulge and pushed, seeking friction.

Unflinching hands freed Rezzu's erection. Good thing those trousers were dark because the ambassador's cock was a broken faucet. Max wondered if all Colviri men seeped as much after seeing the flood Annauk was putting forward. Wickedly, Max traced his drenched fingers over Rezzu's lips. Thanks to the magic of the planet and their technology, his robotic hand (resting on the Colviri's naked hip) sensed the tremor that seized Rezzu and culminated in a breathless moan. He gathered more liquid and tasted it, and his own moan was equal in ardor and sound to Rezzu's.

His forehead rested on a broad shoulder; Max was following a path he shouldn't even be considering, but the command fired at his taste buds by the exquisite flavor was stronger than him. He stroked the solid roundness of Rezzu's ass using one hand, and procured more juices with the other for lubrication. Something primal and possessive guided him, and Rezzu was a fluid mass, pliant and accepting.

Metal met flesh because Max needed to enter Rezzu with his part that was not human—that was artificial but as intrinsic to him as his own skin. In an absolute act of aggressive domination, he coiled the long white braid and pulled down, hissing in that kissable ear, "Otherworldly. That's what I think you are."

And Rezzu groaned and pushed urgently into the metallic finger breaching him. He tried to reach behind, but Max growled, "Hands on the wall."

In the other room, Annauk was on his back, sucking Dominik, who loomed over him with a piston-like rhythm in tandem with Inall's penetration of his exposed hole. By virtue of their own need to watch themselves, the three lovers kept a very clear visual of all their actions for Rezzu and Max.

"Do you know how inappropriate this is?"

"I have an idea, but I'm enjoying myself too much to stop. Do you want me to stop?"

"Sweet goddess, not at all."

"Good."

Rezzu stared at the men but undulated and impaled himself on Max's digit. Max had found his own tempo, stroking Rezzu's cock and fucking him with his

middle finger, almost as if following Inall's lead but not completely. His own cock screamed for release, but Max knew that if he risked it and liberated it, he'd lose the last shred of control he had over the thing growing inside him that was unruly and illogical and unnamed. He shouldn't be doing this; more than undiplomatic it was almost barbaric, and if he went further and let himself entirely inside Rezzu—the battle would be lost forever against that nameless enemy, getting stronger inside him.

"*Kecoswe nurguvaek...*" Rezzu sighed breathlessly. Stretched in an impossible arch, he rested the back of his head on Max's shoulder and pleaded, "Let me touch you, please." This time his voice came out husky and needy, weakening Max's resolution.

"No. This is your moment. Mine will come another day."

Dominik had finished his turn at Annauk's hole, and now both humans were chest on the desk as the Colviri officer prepped them for his own round of penetration. Redheaded Inall was the first to receive Annauk's length, his head backwards thanks to a massive hand pulling his hair. Dominik kissed Inall's exposed throat, moving upward until they were lip-to-lip and swayed by the violent wave of Annauk's thrusts. Annauk kept Dominik's hole busy, using his free hand (was it really free as deep as it was inside the other man?) and making them a complete circuit with their bodies all secured in the ultimate connection.

Rezzu and Annauk came together, separated by a wall but with the same devastating finality; one with a robotic finger inside him, the other deep in the body of another man. Rezzu went lax, flush against Max's chest, for a moment that was too short to be natural, and then, as if guided by a sudden realization, roughly pushed Max away from him, breaking their link.

"*Ketoza Uvolse.*" Rezzu spat, hastily arranging his cock, pulling his trousers up and gathering his tailcoat with a yank.

Shocked, Max was only able to utter a halfhearted, "What?"

The beautiful face was a mixture of anger and shame as Rezzu reached the door, and, before opening it, he turned to Max, "Forgive me. I got carried away."

The door closed with a bang. The explosion made Max react. "No. Wait." He was almost out when he remembered his own coat, and with a huff went to pick it up. He hurried through the now crowded corridors, trying his best not to knock people down and holding down his hat.



At the palace entrance, Max saw Rezzu's braid flapping in the air as he escaped in one of the Colviri transports. His hand went to his wand to stop the vehicle. Max remembered he shouldn't be doing magic in front of the Colviri, but it was for nothing. His wand wasn't in his pocket.

*Shit.*

Max ran back to the Weapon's Room just to find it already occupied. He cleared his throat, "Excuse me."

The man and woman turned his way ready to tell off whoever it was. "Oh, Governor Maitheas." Both tried to put their clothes together. They stood beside the two-way mirror, probably watching other people as well.

"Sorry to interrupt you. I just came to look for something I lost. It'll be just a moment." One glance was enough to find his wand—in many little pieces. He bent as to pick something up and conjured a pocket watch, showing it off to the other two and straightening himself. "Here it is," Max said happily. "My mother will kill me if I lose her gift."

The couple laughed with him. Max turned around and singsonged, "Carry on." More laughter bubbled as he closed the door.

*Maybe if I hadn't reduced it, it would have survived.*

Fragments of the metal shaft and gears and the filament of core that had been Luddi's feather sat on his palm, minute and impossible to repair.

*Well, Governor. You're officially the unbeatable wand-losing champion of Aletta.*

Max was in big trouble if the citizens discovered he didn't have a wand.

His only core option left was to find *his other half*, a seemingly insurmountable feat when he didn't even have a boyfriend. All right, he was a diplomat, he knew how to fake it. He'd find a way; there must be an alternative that didn't involve putting his heart out there to be conquered. He wasn't against it; this wasn't just the right moment for all that. He was not going to rush falling in love simply to get a new wand. No way.

Still, amid the turbulent whirlpool of ideas and schemes in front of him, the image of Rezzu Ki Muselet stood tall and strong as if he was the eye of a hurricane, calm and steady but with troubled eyes.

*Forgive me, Rezzu. It was all my fault.*

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## 5. UNADORNED

“I have no answer for that.” Keda Enoa Ki Muselet, future queen of Mireeh and Rezzu’s sister, shook her head. “If you hadn’t run, you wouldn’t have all these questions eating you.”

“So, you’d have stayed to face the man after he had his finger up your ass when you came in his hand?”

Keda Enoa seemed to consider this, tapping her forefinger over her chin. A trait she had picked up from their father, Kekoa Muselet.

Rezzu rolled his eyes. “Are you serious? You have to think about it?”

“Well, for starters, I wouldn’t have put myself in that situation.”

His sister was insufferable sometimes, but she had a point there. That didn’t mean he wouldn’t have shaken her if she were physically in front of him.

“Besides, you are an adult. It’s not like you can’t have sex with a willing man. What’s so special about this governor?”

“I-I am not supposed to do something like that. I-I haven’t...”

Her eyes went wild, “Brother, you are not a virgin, are you?” Her puzzled face was unbearable. “I thought you were knocking boots with that technician on the *Logandi*!” She was flailing her arms as she walked about her chambers, moving in and out of the screen. “I’m NOT a virgin. How can it be possible that you’re one?!”

“Sister!”

“What?” She stopped her frantic pacing and turned to the screen, catching his astonishment. “Oh, hush. Father said it was natural. How do you know if you like something if you don’t experience it, huh?” She moved closer, flattening her hands on the console, her face occupying almost the entire screen. “Kalhya is so fucking dreamy. Tell me you fucked him, brother. Tell me you did!”

“We... never... actually...”

“Oh, Sweet Meha, what a waste! If I had a cock I’d be putting it in every hole available. WHY AM I NOT A MAN!!!!?”

“Would you calm down? This isn’t about you.”

Keda Enoa sobered up. “You are right. What you need to do is stop being a wuss and act normal. It wasn’t a big deal, you two just went with the flow. If I’d seen three hot guys doing it, I’d have totally gotten carried away too.”

“The Alettans think we are here to invade them.” Rezzu wasn’t a wuss. The whole thing had been just a political mistake. He needed a way to clear the air, and his sister wasn’t helping. She was the political strategist, not him.

“But that’s not the case, so what’s your point?”

Rezzu dithered and did not answer.

“OH NO, you like-*like* him. You like this governor, and that’s why you’re so freaked out!” She jumped and giggled, clapping her hands. “I knew it was something else. You have faced all kinds of dangerous stuff without batting an eye, and this is what’s gonna make you go all wimpy? I knew it. I knew it.”

“Would you stop being obnoxious for a whole standard minute and help me here with what’s really important?”

“And that is...?”

“How do I go about telling him the truth of our mission on his planet?”

In a blink, she was the wise older sister and future queen he needed. “The only way it should be done—complete and without adornments.”

“Thank you.”

“You’re most certainly welcome, Captain.” Keda Enoa uttered, almost aloof. Then with a wicked grin, she giggled. “Now I have to go and tell Father you like-*like* a boy!” And she left the screen empty in a flutter of teal and pink.

Rezzu pinched the bridge of his nose with two fingers. “I’m not gonna kill her. I am *not* going to kill her.” He was not a regicide; although, technically, she wasn’t queen yet.

The Colviri normally lived for more than two thousand standard years. At twenty-six and twenty-five, they were just mere children, even if their bodies and minds were of adults. Rezzu should cut his sister some slack; he had more pressing matters to attend to.

The gorgeous governor of Anatolia emerged in his mind’s eye, and Rezzu shuddered. Was liking this man really affecting his ability to assess the

situation? His first mission as a captain, and he felt he was failing like a total rookie.

“Captain?” Dominik Czech, his first officer, startled Rezzu.

“Yes.”

“The uniform you requested for Governor Maitheas is ready, sir,” the floating voice announced.

A flash of Annauk Ki Illeh and Dominik with the redhead left Rezzu immobile for a second. He wondered if Dominik had his boots under Annauk’s bunker before this mission. No, it couldn’t be. This was the first mission with both races sharing a ship. It was none of his business, anyway. “Please, send a messenger with it to Anatolia’s Palace of Government.”

“At once, Captain.”

All right, Rezzu was a big boy. He was captain of the *Oculus* slash ambassador for the Colviri on Aletta. He knew how to handle many scenarios. Of course, zero percent of those scenarios involved him dealing with a politician who had recently had his artificial finger so deep in Rezzu’s ass the sheer memory sent shivers up his spine. That wasn’t the way to go about this.

*Think Rezzu. Think.*

He snapped his fingers. The uniform would be his guiding light. Max would have to acknowledge the receipt of it in some way. Rezzu would let Max’s behavior determine the path to follow and act accordingly. Here he was drowning in his own nonsense, and maybe, if Meha was merciful, Max had simply chalked it all up to a drunken mishap.

That idea, far from settling him, made him feel like a ginormous pile of veku crap. Rezzu needed something to distract him until Max contacted him. He activated his communicator. “Commader Czech.”

“Yes, Captain.”

“Find me the five biggest, meanest, most brutish crew members and send them to platform nine. I want some hand-to-hand combat practice. Anyone but you and Annauk Ki Illeh.”

“Sir?”

“Dominik, I saw you with Annuak and that redhead last night. I’m gonna need a long time to erase that memory and be able to have you sweating around me again.”

“Captain, I-We...”

“Not a big deal, commander. What you do with your free time is your business. Just find me some people I can get physical with.”

That didn’t sound right.

“I’ll find you some beasts, sir.” The amusement was poorly disguised in Dominik’s tone.

“You do that, commander.”

Three standard hours later, Rezzu had a swollen eye, and every muscle in his body screamed with exhaustion. His eye was nothing in comparison to what he did to the two women and three men who were *practicing* with him. He entered his quarters, ready for a shower and found a white envelope waiting for him on his mini desk. It only had one word outside, in exquisite common language calligraphy: *Rezzu*.

Trying his best not to turn the crisp paper inside into confetti, he read the note.

*Thank you. It fits brilliantly. If you don't have a previous engagement, I'd love to invite you to dinner tonight, an informal affair just between us. I think we both will look very nice in our uniforms. Yours, Max.*

Rezzu was more at a loss than before. He sank onto the bed in a haze, but two words kept replaying in his head over and over; a sultry whisper in Governor Maitheas’s husky voice—*Yours, Max*.

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## 6. OFFERING

The Colviri uniforms were essentially made to protect the body of the user, not for show. A blend of *elastica* (an expansive fiber) and an alloy of three micro minerals provided a perfect fitting for every body type and a shield that could withstand most short-range attacks. During combat, it was paired with a helmet and gloves to protect the areas the uniform didn't cover. Regulation boots had sheaths where one could carry a knife or other weapon.

For official ceremonies, rank was shown by arraying three colored cords around the shoulders from right to left, whereas in action the color would be in a band (made of the same blend as the uniform) on the right upper arm. The suit expanded to be donned in an upward fashion, starting by one's feet and accommodating to every contour of the body without the use of additional fastenings.

Besides protection against assault, the uniform also protected against weather conditions, whether warm or cold, keeping the body at a regular temperature to function properly by absorbing sweat or providing heat. It included the option to copy any color of its surroundings for camouflage purposes if activated. This feature was often used for personal reasons, as was Rezzu's case tonight, to change the silvery gray of the uniform into a more celebratory outfit. He had chosen a light blue shade that was very similar to the midday sky of Aletta.

This decision was the only one he had been able to make without a thousand doubts. Rezzu wanted to look his best tonight, but beyond that he was in deep turmoil, unsure of what to expect once he was facing Max.

The first punch in the guts was the person waiting for him at the entrance of the Palace of Government. Dominik and Annauk's redheaded companion from the previous night welcomed him with a bright smile, identifying himself as Max's assistant, Inall Brix. Now Rezzu recognized the man, always hovering around Max but in such an unobtrusive way as to be almost part of the environment, almost indiscernible.

*It's a mere coincidence.*

Although, Rezzu couldn't shake the feeling it had been a carefully orchestrated maneuver designed to unhinge him. There was no such thing as coincidence after all. Everything happened for a reason. He decided to face this encounter in the same way he'd engage in a military operation.

As the redhead guided him, Rezzu took a surreptitious deep breath and armed himself with courage. True, he wasn't facing an enemy (no open hostilities between the Colviri and the Alettans), but it was a situation seriously out of his control and his comfort zone. Yes, he had liked other men before. Well, never a human, even though his father was one. The thing was, there was something in Governor Maitheas that Rezzu hadn't encountered before, and, by the simple fact that he couldn't name or completely understand this obscure quality, he was not capable of setting a decisive course of action.

After winding their way through the palace, Rezzu and his guide stopped before great wooden doors flanked—not by soldiers but by two helpers in lively colors. Now he felt stupid having the two almost-bully crew members behind him. The helpers pulled the doors open, and Rezzu received another strike. Max stood on the far end of the room close to an enormous window, his hands clasped behind his back, looking outside. He did not wear his usual hat; it would have been silly since he was wearing the Colviri uniform, but he had discovered the camouflage feature and was decked in greenish blue very similar to his pet peacock's feathers. The visible part of his metal neck glinted coyly in the bright light of the room, enhanced by the darkness of the suit.

“Governor, your guest is here.”

Max turned around to beam at Rezzu with disarming charm. Rezzu heard the doors close behind him as Inall exited the room. Once more he was alone with the governor, but the odds were different. The tension in the air charged the moment with an intensity that didn't have anything to do with the politics of planets or the plans of conflicting forces. It was the, for now, subtle energy of two males in need of one another, the aura of an incoming storm, the clandestine stretch of the volcano before erupting.

Rezzu had to be strong, remain in control; it wouldn't be wise to be pliant matter in the hands of the governor again. This time it should be—stay behind your lines or be the aggressor.

“I'm truly glad you accepted my invitation, Captain.” Max took Rezzu's hand between both of his, and shook it.

“Back to formalities, I see.”

A grin flourished on Max's distracting face. “It shouldn't be so, right?”

“It's certainly a little late for that.”

His hand was released, and Max pointed at the table. “Let's eat, and we can have a nice conversation afterward.”

“Thank you.”

They sat on opposite sides of a cozy table. A handsome copper, low vase, fashioned after flames, with a fragrant candle was in the center instead of flowers. The crisp, white tablecloth had russet borders.

Helpers came and went with rich and aromatic dishes.

Max poured Rezzu another glass of a soft, fuzzy liquor made of figs. “I hope everything is to your satisfaction.”

“Each course has been delicious. Most people usually start from the lightest to the spiciest, but this journey was simply unexpected.”

“Oh, but we’d rather start hard to end up soft and glowing.”

Rezzu almost snorted his drink. “Th-that’s a great philosophy.”

“We try to apply it to all things. A first harsh impact lets you know what you’re facing and eases you into kinder options.”

“Wouldn’t that be a show of force?”

“Not if you do it the right way.”

A helper brought dessert, and Rezzu took advantage of the interruption to avoid issuing a retort. The sorbet was orange, pink, and yellow in a swirl of creamy delight, garnished with a single dark green lemon leaf.

“This is a family recipe. It’s what I’ve been waiting all night for you to try.”

The intention of saying something witty vanished with the sudden explosion seizing his taste buds. The concoction was so good, it left Rezzu speechless and nearly aroused. A moan inadvertently rose. He flinched, gazing upon Max, who watched him with a predatory gleam in his pale green eyes that was frankly disturbing and did nothing to quench the arousal the dessert had brought forth.

“Amazing,” Rezzu stated, out of words.

“The secret is passion fruit, collected at midnight under a full moon.”

“Sounds like something you might use for a potion.” The Colviri associated magic with Meha, their goddess, but it wasn’t unheard of common folk with unnatural abilities to know how to brew concoctions.

The wolfish grin was mesmerizing, “Perhaps, a *love* potion.”

Heat enveloped Rezzu. Max didn’t need magic to have him in the palm of his hand; he only needed to ask, and Rezzu would be the most obedient pet.



Caution flew out the window, and he blurted out, "You have enough attributes to conquer anything you want without supernatural assistance."

Max inclined his head agreeably. "An extra hand is never unwelcome." He put both hands over the table and added, albeit hesitantly. "I've thought a lot about what happened last night."

"You have?"

"Yes."

"I see."

"And we have a problem."

"Please don't apologize."

"That is not my intention. Remorse is a thing I don't suffer easily." Still, Max looked contrite. "I'm nothing, if not fair. There's only one way for us to be even and let that episode go, so we could find a way to enter into a fair friendship and guide our planets to mutual benefit."

A very odd sensation grabbed Rezzu by the balls. Part of him blindly hoped for this to go the way his cock was clamoring for. The other was absolutely sure he needed to stand up and run as if chased by the plague. "W-what do you propose?"

"Isn't it obvious?"

"I'm afraid not."

"You must finger me until I come." The tone was matter-of-fact, and the narrowed gaze felt like a knife, slicing through Rezzu's defenses.

"You can't be serious." But as much as reasoning and intellect were beyond offended by the idea, the material part of him, the animal, primal part of him was absolutely pleased and made his cock perk.

"I am deadly serious. However, I'm going to let you think about it 'til you finish your dessert." The delicate silver spoon in Max's hand began moving again with elegant efficiency, and each tidbit disappearing into that provocative, cruel mouth was pure torture.

Neither spoke until the dessert had been completely consumed, although, it had been a slow dance to see who could eat it slower, but enjoying it all the same. Rezzu had to suppress the moans every mouthful tried to wrench from inside him as he retained a monolithic exterior. The offering had been shocking,

and, despite his inward turmoil, he was not going to let Max have the upper hand, even if Rezzu's own hand would be the one doing the invasion.

But, was it really an invasion when your opponent was blatantly letting you in? Couldn't it be just a very well-devised lure to trap you and then force you to relent, to spill the secrets you were not ready to reveal? What would Keda do? No. His sister, the strategist, wasn't the best guide in this moment. She wouldn't simply finger Max; she would choke him with her imaginary cock while finger blasting him, and her *kirsuber* on top would be to fuck him on his back with four fingers inside his mouth to keep the choking theme up. Those images didn't help. On the contrary, they deflated his already weak resolution to refuse the fingering offer while inflaming lower parts.

*"Oh just finger him and stop being a wuss."* His sister's sardonic voice taunted him. *"What's the worst that could happen, that you enjoy it too much and come with him? Yeah, I bet he'd love that. To be drenched in your come, brother."*

Rezzu hoped his wince had been imperceptible, but as he settled his eyes on Max, the arched eyebrow told him otherwise.

The girl helper took away their dessert plates and left them after Max's, "That would be all, Leena. Thank you."

If Rezzu caught the complete meaning of the words, there would be no interruptions until Max summoned someone directly.

"Have you reached a decision?" Max spoke, getting to his feet and pulling the neck of his uniform with a finger, in the exact way to take it off. By the time he was at arm's length of Rezzu's face he had the flaccid arms of the suit hanging about his hips. The fine mat of hair covering his chest shone in various hues of brown, red, and yellow. His nipples were rosy medallions crowned with tiny suckable mounds. The same polished brass of his artificial neck, arm and hand covered his ribs and diaphragm, a two- or three-inch grommet encircled a glowing silvery blue light sitting low between his pecs. Rezzu saw the veins bulging in Max's flesh arm, and the idea of a thick vein running the length of Max's shaft made his mouth water—and sealed his fate.

"I-I did." He was young, very green by the longevity of his people, and his voice came out full of inexperience and fear, more than it should have been. Still, a wicked part of him added, "But these are not the same circumstances. I feel like I'm taking advantage of you."

An eyebrow hiked up on Max's brow, accompanied by an expression, even more wicked than whatever had made Rezzu utter those words, coming alive on his face. "You mean we need to call three other men to have sex where we can watch as you finger me?"

"NO." Rezzu sprang, and ended up looming over Max, their faces mere inches apart. "That's not what I meant." Although, he frankly didn't know what he had meant.

"Well, then." Max turned, letting Rezzu see the expanse of his shoulders, the way his exposed spine made of intricate brass gears and dots of that silvery blue light curved invitingly as he lowered the uniform and exposed his round, muscular glutes. He climbed onto the table, snuffing the candle in its copper vase off with a soft blow that had him in such a vulnerable position, it made Rezzu shiver. He winked, lowering his chest more and spreading his legs as wide as the suit around his thighs permitted. "Yours to do as you please."

Rezzu didn't know whether to sob like a puny child or howl like a beast in heat. Max's skin was so perfect, it seemed a crime to mar it with a single touch. Hesitantly, he moved closer, and the predator, the monster inside, won. He did what any animal would once it had reached its prey; he sniffed, he inhaled, and the aroma was all teasing—all manly, and with the urge of this primal instinct he sank his teeth into a luscious cheek.

The sound that came out of Max was a whiplash, and the beast became frenetic, frantically grabbing, spreading, mauling. And the rougher his mouth and hands were, the more he understood the grunts and growls emerging from the governor; they were commands to conquer, to ravish, to destroy.

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## 7. EMBRACE

The first time his hand grasped the governor's throat, he was surprised by the warmth of the metal. He didn't know why he'd thought the artificial parts of the man would be cold. The heat emanating from the body pressed against his was absolute proof that the man was only cold when he decided to be that way, by his actions, by the manner in which his pale green eyes could dominate you if that was his intention.

But now those eyes were shut and the cruel mouth was open exhaling a long moan of pleasure and submission, "Please."

That unnamed thing that had been dormant inside Rezzu while Max had fingered him the previous night growled, "Say it." Two fingers kept their slow piston-like rhythm into the sweet orifice. Max didn't answer, just squeezed the digits invading him, sending bolts that fathered goose bumps and made Rezzu's cock jerk.

Every cell of Rezzu's body demanded him to be properly sheathed inside the governor. Fingers were not enough. Nonetheless, Rezzu still had a tendril of control over his animal urges. Max had offered him the opportunity to finger him to level the playing field; what he didn't put on the table (figuratively since he was actually on all fours over a table) was the option to allow Rezzu to fuck him. Nevertheless, that was exactly what the inner beast demanded, forgetting that Colviri seed spilled inside a human would change his DNA. Yes, it would cause a human to be stronger and live longer. That's how his human father would be able to live as long as his Colviri father, and that was a good thing, wasn't it?

But did Rezzu have the right to alter Max's life like that without his knowledge? Just by the fact that if Max said the words, Rezzu's cock would be so deep inside him in a nanosecond that the Universe wouldn't have time to adjust to the shift in their matter?

Rezzu couldn't think straight, but he fought the beast effectively enough to conclude he couldn't dump all this biological info on Max while he was in this vulnerable position. This wasn't the time for that. He waited a few moments, and no coherent sound came out of Max. He kissed the square shoulder softly, lifted his weight and moved to his feet, leaving just his pumping fingers as connection, looking for a reaction.

And the reaction came swiftly.

Something closer to a growl than to a grunt emerged as Max reached between his legs to grab Rezzu's cock with his robotic hand. The burning metal was a disconcerting new experience. Perhaps under other circumstances he would have been afraid for his manhood, but in the heat of the moment, the only message reaching his clouded brain was *Max is stroking my cock*.

The Colviri by nature effused floods of precum to use as lubricant for penetration, and Rezzu had been using it to ease his fingers' way into Max, but now it was the perfect substance helping those brass digits to glide over his shaft with the exact amount of grasp and corkscrew motion to drive Rezzu blindly and summarily to the edge.

Thus, understanding Max's action as tacit permission, Rezzu took hold of the governor's cock and milked it for all he was worth. They became a well-oiled mechanism, its gears stroking, pumping, entering. Rezzu's sole intention now was to bring Max to climax, to see him tremble with the explosion, and savor it; even if he wouldn't be able to see that glorious face when it happened. Maybe this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, but their positions were too well-orchestrated to attempt any change, not in this moment, not tonight.

His own orgasm neared, and Rezzu redoubled his efforts, both his hands in absolute synchrony, pulling and pushing, stabbing and stroking. Max moved the hand supporting his torso upward and used it to draw one ass cheek further apart, seeking (by the rising volume of his moans) a fuller and deeper penetration desperately, while the other was a blur in its frenetic maneuvers to wrench the culmination from Rezzu.

"So close, so fucking close, Rezzu, please." The voice was broken and breathless, and it tugged at Rezzu's volatile, primal urges.

Another finger found its way in, and Max cried as Rezzu nursed his little pleasure nub with precise and fast strokes. Rezzu tilted his head slightly, and Max's new position (his head resting sideways over the table) allowed him to see the handsome face contorted in a delight-torture mask. The first contraction of secret muscles gripped Rezzu's fingers, and jets of semen sped, splashing over Rezzu's cock and triggering his own climax, perplexing and shattering.

But something that didn't have anything to do with the volcanos erupting from both of them happened. Ornate vases rose from their pedestals, the paintings on the walls rattled, the long, heavy curtains oscillated as if inflicted by an invisible force, and a sound like an enraged wind circled them.

Rezzu saw these things through the orgasm-induced haze, and, before he had time to fully grasp the disturbance in the room, vases crashed on the floor, paintings unhinged themselves from the walls, curtains were torn apart, and with a final howl all went silent. Just their weak breathing intruded on the oppressing silence. Rezzu was used to supernatural manifestations, after all Kekoa Muselet, his father, was a high priest of Meha (after he had been guardian of their ancestors planet for many centuries), and her rites were anything but immobile. The thing was—he usually knew what was originating the commotion.

His eyes went to Max, and Max flinched. His flinch didn't look like it was caused by the removal of Rezzu's fingers from his well-used pucker but as the flinch of someone caught in something they shouldn't be doing. "What just happened?" Rezzu casually cleaned his hands with the tablecloth; it was ruined anyway.

Trying to find a more dignified position than his ass in the air, Max stood up, pulled his uniform up to his waist and sat at the edge of the table. "I know you need an explanation. Just let me make a call first, and then I'll do something better than talk, I'll show you."

A standard hour later, Max was in his usual ensemble of boots, trousers, waistcoat, shirt, cravat, and his slightly tilted hat. A messenger had brought Rezzu a clean uniform to wear. They headed toward a part of Anatolia Rezzu hadn't visit before, where the streets were narrower and the buildings seemed not just older but strangely toppling onto each other. Above them, stars shone timidly—more ashamed than afraid of illuminating the situation.

"I appreciate your patience, Rezzu." Max seemed nervous, something that disturbed Rezzu greatly. The governor was normally so confident—this new facet was unnerving.

"As long as an explanation comes at the end, I am very patient." His words brought a faintly reddish hue to Max's perfect cheeks.

*Now he's embarrassed.*

The carriage stopped in front of an establishment that looked like the lovechild of a chemist's and a repair shop. The similitudes with Nova Gaia helped Rezzu to not feel extremely disoriented in this seemingly old-fashioned environment.

A slim old man with thin, gray hair, gathered with a knotted silk ribbon on the base of his neck, welcomed them after the door, paneled with see-through glass, closed behind them accompanied by the happy ring of a minute bell.

The apothecary (Rezzu didn't know what else to call the gentleman) wore glasses with several lenses on each side. He moved them to the top of his head as he shook Max's hand first and then Rezzu's.

"Oh, yes, the Colviri ambassador." His name was Esaw Apteekerune. "But everyone just calls me Master Esaw, never bothered with Mister Apteekerune." He giggled easily.

"Master Esaw, would you help me with the thing we spoke about?"

"Of course, Governor. It would be my pleasure." He moved to lock the shop's door. These obviously weren't normal hours for him. "Please follow me." He took them to the back. The idea of a repair shop became stronger as they entered a space so crowded with all kinds of gears and metal scraps it seemed that everything was precariously hanging—ready to fall on their heads.

Among the disorder, dozens of glass jars emerged, their contents were indistinguishable tendrils in many colors suspended in transparent solutions. Rezzu moved closer to one jar and realized that the fragile little thing floated in... nothing; no solution, no liquid, or gas of any kind. Was it some type of gravitational force? In such little spaces, it didn't make any sense.

"Ambassador Muselet, if you'd be so kind. How many days have you been on the planet?"

How many days indeed? The standard hours didn't exactly correlate with Aletta's rotation. He was mentally doing the equation when Max put a hand on his arm and answered Master Esaw. "The sun has set eleven times since they arrived."

That would be around fifteen standard days. It truly seemed longer.

"I guess that is enough, considering he's an adult."

Rezzu wanted to say he was very young by the usual longevity of his people, but the comment seemed childish. He simply smiled. In his face it felt more like a grimace, but he was sure it was a smile.

Master Esaw opened a big crystal box with several compartments. Each compartment had a tray with at least a dozen slim cylinders made of different metals and with unknown symbols etched in low relief. Flutes came to mind, but they were entirely too narrow and didn't seem to have any holes. The nine trays were arranged about the table after the box had been moved to a different counter. The old apothecary cleared his throat, clapped his hands once and then

rubbed them, not as if washing them but as if he were rubbing a stick to make a fire. Rezzu had seen his uncle Sule do this while camping on one of the heavily forested moons of Mireeh.

“REZ-zu-ki-MU-sE-let,” Master Esaw intoned with weird affectation. He stopped his rubbing and moved his hands over the trays, palms down and using circular flourishes. From the farthest tray, an argentine tube rose and moved as if guided by a magnetic force toward Master Esaw’s waiting hand. “Excellent.” He moved his glasses back to his nose and adjusted several lenses. “Aletta silver and river stone. Very light. Very nice,” he murmured, more to himself than to them, and handed the instrument to Rezzu.

A soft, almost inaudible clicking emanated from the tube. The piece was sturdy and the weight seemed just right to Rezzu’s hand. He drew it to his ear and the ticking was similar to a clock but not quite the same. It had a truly hypnotic rhythm, and for some inexplicable reason this little, almost imperceptible sound made Rezzu very happy, almost euphoric.

“Ambassador, if you please, point that way.” Master Esaw redirected Rezzu’s hand away from them. “And think *water*.”

Before Rezzu could come up with any appropriate reasoning to question the request, he thought ‘water’ and a jet of liquid spurted from the tip of the tube. The idea of making a mess shifted his thoughts to something to gather the water, and a bucket appeared out of thin air before any liquid was spilled. He let the tube in his hand go, and it melodically clattered as it reached the floor. The bucket full of water was floating slowly downward, and Rezzu realized that Master Esaw was using a darker but similar tube to direct it.

Rezzu turned to look at Max, crossing his arms and not really understanding what was happening. “What is this?”

Max inclined his head sideways and smiled, “The magic of Aletta has just embraced you, choosing a wand for you.”

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## 8. PRICE

“Am I screwed or what?”

Unos circled the bench where he sat. The lusciousness and beauty of the West Garden seemed to make fun of him. The bright sky, the fluffy clouds, the fragrance of the flowers, all conspired to make him feel like a stinking pile of shit.

“Oh, Max. What can I do to help you?” Unos stopped in front of him.

“No response from him?” *Him* was Rezzu, who had decided to ignore Max after he left Master Esaw’s wand shop five standard days ago. They had been together in this garden, and that didn’t help his mood either.

“I have not received any communications from Captain Muselet at all.”

Rezzu had abandoned his wand that night, and now it floated above Max’s palm. His usual silver lining approach to things attempted to cheer him up, pointing out the fact that thanks to Rezzu, Max had a quasi-surrogate wand he could use publicly in case people wondered whether he had broken another already or not.

One could use someone else’s wand for emergencies but not for long since each one was linked to its owner by its components and the essence of the person. Max didn’t mention to Master Esaw when he called to request a wand for Rezzu that he had lost his. The wandmaster wasn’t a tattler, but there was no point in putting out there that another wand of his had gone to smithereens, especially when Max would not be able to procure a new one right away.

To make matters worse (because hey, wand-losing wasn’t the worst thing that could happen to a governor), the other six cities had decided the honeymoon period with the Colviri had been long enough and demanded to know their actual plans regarding Aletta. Were they here to conquer them, to help them, to annihilate them? Max rolled his eyes. If the Colviri wanted to start a war, it would have happened already, right? He had been so caught up in his own emotional caca regarding Rezzu, he hadn’t had the time to act like the big shot in charge that he was and ask straight-faced what was the Colviri’s deal.

But of course, his cock, who had never had an opinion before on political matters, had to interfere and sidetrack him during The One Thousand Ball. He

made blasted Rezzu drink a little more than necessary just to have him buzzed enough to give him the answers he needed. But no, he had to be waylaid by how good Rezzu looked in his tailcoats, how broad his shoulders were, how mesmerizingly his eyes shone as they devoured Max more openly with each glass of Calvados.

*I should have yanked the info out of him when I had my finger up his ass.*

And naturally, to add insult to injury, his brilliant idea of procuring a wand for Rezzu had blown up in his face as if it were just another one of his reckless experiments. It was his mistake for thinking that Rezzu was prepared, not just to accept that the planet made the inhabitants conduits of its magic but to be willing to assimilate such a leap of faith and work with it without any training. Well, Rezzu hadn't given him time to explain anything; he'd just stormed out of the Wand Shop. But what else could Max have done? Without his own wand to focus the power, the magic had gone haywire, exposing itself as they climaxed.

Unos was making some truly silly, dejected sounds, unable to find a way to help Max. They were so pathetic even Luddi had come to find out what was going on. "Unos, play some music." Anything to stop him.

Luddi jumped onto the bench and rested his head on Max's lap. "Oh Sweet 'verse, you too?"

"I've never seen a peacock do that. Well, nobody is used to seeing you look like such a sad sack."

"Meidhre!" In other circumstances he would have stood up to greet her, but Luddi didn't seem interested in moving his head from Max's lap. He grimaced, pointing at the bird, and shrugged.

His cousin waved her hand, dismissing the fact. She traced a finger over Unos, who played the Enolia Symphony, a one hundred year old airy composition made to honor one of the seven city-states.

Max stared at his cousin. Any other person wearing such bright tones of orange and yellow would look like a lunatic, but Meidhre... everyone would agree that the sun was making love to her.

"So, what's going on? What's all this gloominess? It's not like you, Max."

"I did something I shouldn't have done."

She put her hands on her hips and cocked her elegantly coifed head. "And what's new about that? Your success is based on your uncanny ability to do the

wrong thing to the best end.” She was more than correct, but right now Max felt absolutely out of abilities.

“I know, I just...”

“Problems with the cities?”

Max shook his head. Technically the cities were about to be a problem, but they weren't the main issue.

Meidhre singsonged, tilting her body toward him, “Boy problems?”

Max snorted, “Seriously, coz? When have I ever had boy problems? They are not problems, they are noo-san-ces.”

“Oh, sweetie. It's boy problems. You have that I-like-a-boy-and-he-doesn't-like-me-back face. Who is he?”

“It's not that he doesn't like me. I messed up.”

“Aha!” She pointed at him. “Am I an expert or what?”

“You are a boy. That's what you are, a raging nuisance.”

“Keep saying that I'm a boy, and I'm going to show you my boy *bits*.”

Max didn't say “Eww” but his face did more than scream it. Meidhre giggled with all the girly-ness she was capable of, and that was a lot. She addressed Luddi, “Hey, boy. C'mere, pretty boy.”

Luddi perked up. If there was an attention-whore in Aletta—that was his pet peacock. Meidhre moved backward, calling Luddi; he jumped from the bench and follow her. “Show me. Who's the pretty birdie?” She was using that voice people use with little babies and mini dogs, and it was annoying as fuck. Luddi spread his tail and started strutting for Meidhre. “Oh my gosh, so pretty.” She clapped and gushed like the spectacle was the best thing since the discovery of magic. After the (surely) longest two standard minutes in the galaxy, she sobered up, stood straight and pointed at Max, doing circles with the tip of her finger. “You, leave all that shitty mood behind and come with me.”

*Geesh, she sounds like the twins. Do I need to be scared?*

Max hurriedly followed Meidhre, who walked resolutely toward the Palace of Government. They reached the marble stairs connecting the garden to the building when Unos announced. “I have a message from Inall Brix.”

“Proceed.”

Inall's fidgeting hologram appeared, "Governor, representatives from Garulia, Benvelia, Enolia, Criavilia and the capital are here to see you."

"They can't just appear like that. It's against protocol."

"Well," Inall visibly dithered. "They said that when the security of the planet is in jeopardy the protocol is void, null, toilet water."

"I can't believe they just compared the protocol, the one directive that guides our society, to toilet water." His cousin giggled beside him. It was outrageous.

"As a matter of fact, I'm pretty sure they meant *used* toilet water." Inall grimaced sheepishly.

Cursing inwardly, Max huffed, "All right, gather them in the conference chamber. I'll be there in a spell." He turned to face Meidhre, "Sorry, coz." Before Inall's image disappeared, he remembered, "Wait. You didn't mention Vimilia. No representative?"

The hologram's cheeks darkened, "Bertoldo Whinen said he had *more* interesting things to do while in Anatolia than to argue with its governor since at the end he'll find out what the heck was happening, one way or another, and left for the shopping quarter."

"He's right, five against one is already a gangbang," Meidhre commented with a grimace.

"I could sit you in that chamber as an advisor so you can participate in that gangbang, darling."

"Not my type of gangbang, sweetie."

*Mine either.*

Meidhre kissed both his cheeks. "Saved by the beasts." She giggled musically. "You deal with them, and I'll deal with *you* later."

"Do I need to be scared?"

"Not if you're a good boy."

"You need to go."

She blew a kiss and glided away.

Max entered the palace en route to the conference chamber with Unos trailing behind him. At the chamber's doors, he adjusted his hat, straightened

his cravat and pulled down his coat. Taking a deep breath, he opened the doors and found the representatives seated, eating finger food and drinking from crystal flutes. "Gentlemen." Max stood, facing them with his hands behind his back. They had already broken protocol so he might as well.

"Lord Governor." Behof Leven from Criavilia went to his feet, tiny little feet holding a blimp figure, currently veering toward Max. The fabric covering his body could easily father clothing for a whole family. Excess had a very round face. "You need to tell us what's going on with the alien force." The other four bobbed their heads without stopping their face-stuffing.

"It was my understanding that your governors had given Anatolia full control of the situation."

Tassio Palú from the capital, Perselia, audibly swallowed "They did, but a report hasn't come forward, and the people of the cities are worried. We have no information to ease their concerns, and that's making our leaders look bad." Tassio was a tall, handsome man, but his expression at the moment made him seem a broken statue.

"They have been here close to a standard month. It's illogical that you still have no inkling to their purpose." Garulia's Hebba Lain stated irritably. His acid face contorted but never stopped chewing.

*Twenty standard days are not a standard month.*

Max rolled his eyes mentally. "Your lack of information to pass is hardly a reason for this meeting." Max walked toward the liquor cabinet and poured himself a drink. The helpers had retreated as soon as he entered the chamber so they could talk privately. Their conversation was being recorded by the Palace's main security system, but that was a different matter.

Makia Vole stood up abruptly, setting his flute aside. "Benvelia is moving her troops to the Yerma Plains to assist Anatolia. The other cities are doing the same." His handlebar mustache was ready to jump from his face in his agitation.

To refuse them was practically a declaration of war, but their intervention could start one with the Colviri. "You realize they only have one ship here. No other is in the vicinity of our planet." Max sipped his drink with feigned calm. "How do you think a show of force will appear to them?"

"We don't care. We want answers, and sometimes one needs to be a bully to get them." Tassio shrugged. The others did their head-bobbing, agreeing.

Max wanted to raise his voice, but he summoned control. He would show these idiots why the people of Anatolia had elected him to be their governor. “This is very undiplomatic. Hostile negotiations are never a solution. There’s always one party resenting them afterward. We don’t even know how powerful they are.”

Behof had finally towed his considerable frame to Max’s proximity and put a bejeweled chubby hand on Max’s shoulder. “That’s for you to find out, Governor. You have seventy-two standard hours. After that, we take control of the situation.”

The other six governors had sent this flock of morons to intimidate him. Disliking him wasn’t enough; they had wiped their asses with Aletta’s protocol, which clearly stated that any global decision had to be a joint decision. This was one of those moments when his own wand would have been truly handy to transmogrify the representatives into hairy crawlies and send them back to their masters in gift baskets.

*Am I screwed or what?*

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## 9. BELIEVING

Rezzu's father sighed. "No. He did not."

"Yes, he lied to me."

"He didn't lie, Rezzu. It's not like you asked him if he had magical abilities and he said no. What are you afraid of?" Concern was not a nice visage on Kekoa Muselet's face. Rezzu usually discussed these matters with his other father, but Darien Wanao was stuck in a meeting of the security council of Mireeh.

"I don't know." He was clutching desperately to the fact that Max had withheld information regarding the inhabitants of the planet's capacity for magic to keep his own feelings stashed in the shame drawer.

"I cannot help you, if you don't know what kind of help you need."

"Captain?" Dominik Czech's voice floated behind him.

"This better be important."

"The Alettans are assembling a military force outside Anatolia."

"I'll get back to you, Father."

"May Meha guard you, son."

"Thank you. I'll be in touch."

That was the difference between his two fathers' approaches to things. Darien would have been all concerned about what the Alettans were doing and spoken words of caution. Kekoa would simply let him be; he knew that if Rezzu needed help, he'd ask for it. The first thing he'd learned at Academy was to set his pride aside and accept the advice and wisdom of others when he didn't have his own answer. Many people had lost their lives for being stubborn. Max Maitheas was really doing a number on Rezzu's behavior, and that needed to stop.

"Can we talk, sir?" Dominik sounded hesitant.

"Of course, come to my quarters."

Four standard minutes later, his first officer faced him with an anguished countenance. "As your friend, Rezzu, I'm begging you. Talk to him."

"He put you up to this, didn't he?"

“His assistant, Inall, told me.”

“So, you have kept in touch with him.” Rezzu put his hands up. “I apologize. It’s none of my business. And it is none of *your* business what’s going on between the governor and me.”

“At this point, it’s beyond whatever personal conflict you two have. We didn’t come here to start a war. We came to offer them our help.”

“They’ve fared perfectly well without any help.”

“I’m aware of that, but we have our orders, sir.”

“Now you’re talking as second in command, not my friend.”

“If I need to go there, I will. Sir.”

Fine. It was time to forget what Rezzu wanted (although he wasn’t exactly sure of what Rezzu wanted) and start acting like a Colviri captain and de facto ambassador on this planet. Max was their connection to Aletta, and he needed to behave like an adult, not a conflicted child.

“Let’s go to the bridge. This needs to be dealt with as a matter between two planets, not between two men.”

*Even if a space storm rages inside my stomach every time I see him.*

Dominik smiled. “Thank you, Captain.”

“Don’t thank me yet. We might still be attacked, and I am authorized to defend us, if it comes to that.”

A sorry nod was all Dominik could manage. They exited his quarters and walked swiftly to the bridge. As they entered, after everyone’s salute, Rezzu asked, “What’s the situation?”

“They have land and air vehicles heavily armed according to our sensors, nothing really capable of damaging our shields, sir. But there is something else our instruments cannot quantify. They have shields made of a force we are not able to identify, and thus we don’t know how to penetrate it.”

*Magic.*

His crew needed to know what they were facing. “Open shipwide communications.”

“Ready, sir.”

“This is your captain. Brothers and sisters of the *Oculus*, it has come to our knowledge that the Alettans have the power to wield magic.” He let that sink in



for a moment. A collective gasp was the reaction in the bridge. Some Nova Gaians performed complicated hand movements to ward off evil, and the Colviri, who were used to the magic of their goddess, only looked in Rezzu's direction with wide eyes. "We do not know if they're planning to use it as a weapon against us, but it is my intention to find out as soon as I finish this communication. May Meha guard us all." He nodded, and the shipwide line was closed.

"This is the variable that may cost us our lives, sir." Dominik murmured at his right. He didn't question how Rezzu knew about the magic, but it was probable that he himself already knew thanks to his proximity to Max's assistant. It wasn't important now.

"Then let's find out the rest of the equation, commander." Rezzu turned one more time to the communications officer and said, "Please place a call to the governor of Anatolia."

"Aye, Captain."

In less than a standard minute, Max appeared on the giant screen. "Captain Muselet." he inclined his head slightly, but didn't say anything else.

It was Rezzu who needed to start the match. The many standard days without seeing Max had enhanced all Rezzu's idyllic ideas, and the aloof face but intent eyes made his knees weaken, assuring him his memory was pathetic. Max was ten times more stunning than he remembered, dressed all in black, which also hardened his features. "Governor, do we have a problem?"

"We actually do." Max didn't say this apologetically. It sounded more like a very unwelcome burden. "The other cities want answers. Answers they seem to think are more easily obtained by force than intelligence."

"They will not accomplish anything by attacking us."

"That I know. I'm still the mediator between our planets but not for long. If they don't get the responses they expect in the next sixty standard hours, they will do as they see fit."

"Do you agree with this?" Rezzu needed to learn Max's position before acting.

"I do not. Having a battle with an indeterminate force at the doors of my city is not how I envisioned *our* encounter to proceed."

Rezzu understood. Max wasn't talking just about the battle preparations of his people. "Are you willing to meet?" Rezzu's voice came out firm even

though everything inside him was in absolute turmoil. He had denied Max so many times in the past few days, it was an absurd but still a real possibility that Max would refuse him just to get even, since he believed in leveling the playing field and all that. He held his breath.

Max seemed to consider the meeting for several heartbeats. "I'm willing..." he paused, arching an eyebrow, "but we'll do it in neutral territory."

"And where is this, Governor?"

"The air, of course," Max smiled, "Ambassador."

Dominik cleared his throat and said under his breath, "I don't like it, sir."

Patting Dominik's upper back, Rezzu said to Max, "How many?" He felt Dominik stiffen.

"You bring four. I bring four."

"You provide the locale?"

"Absolutely."

"Thank you, Governor. How long do you need?"

"A standard hour would be more than enough."

"You were prepared."

"Always, *Rezzu*. Always." Max's image easily dissolved, and the screen showed the plains where the Alettan forces were converging.

"He called you by your name, sir."

"He did, and I know why."

"Really?"

No matter their confusion and feelings toward each other, they both would defend their people. And in Max's case, it wasn't the Alettans in general but the people of Anatolia. Rezzu spoke softly but confidently. "He wasn't alone, and he is on our side. Let's get ready to play."

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## 10. FLOATING

The Colviri aircraft did an outstanding maneuver, turning sideways on its axis, and shot at the warkite. The protective shield sifted the ray, turning it into vapor. Another warkite came from below and aimed a couple of thermo missiles at the invading aircraft. The missiles exploded in the periphery of the Colviri vehicle without causing any damage, its own protections keeping it safe. They flew like this for several standard minutes, doing loops, chasing, zigzagging; four against four. Rays turning into vapor, missiles exploding harmlessly, a mock battle that only served the purpose of allowing both forces to blow off some steam.

“So, this is your people being hard first?” Rezzu asked, eyes glued to the dance outside the blimp; a choreography that should have been macabre but did not cost any lives since both vehicles were remotely controlled.

“I thought you weren’t paying attention that night.”

Rezzu gave Max a sideways glance. “I’m deeply offended.” The voice had sounded stern but with a hint of mischief in it that had Max’s cock stirring.

“They were using invisibility spells. They could have invaded my city easily, letting me react when it was already too late to do something without a massacre.”

“They coerced you then.” Rezzu shook his head.

“The relationship between the city-states has always been fragile. I became governor because I helped to change the cloak-and-dagger style of diplomacy into a barefaced, direct approach. Of course, the Old Guard wasn’t thrilled by it, and that earned me a few enemies.”

“*Fusdulatex*,” Rezzu murmured under his breath.

Max chuckled; the word sounded like a curse. He continued. “But I have faith that in time, as more weasels retire or die, things will change. They could use your presence to forge my downfall, but I am confident you are here to give me the answers I need. They would be my weapons against their intentions.”

Before Rezzu could say anything, one of the Colviri aircrafts attempted to crash itself into a warkite. It disjoined instead of exploding, letting the other pass through it like a knife through butter and becoming two identical (if smaller) warkites. There was a roaring cheer from the ground. Max made a

mental note to congratulate and decorate the controller of that warkite for his mastery. Max would have vanished the warkite; this was not just remarkable but creative. A bit of showing off too, but that was part of the mock battle. He sipped his tea and uncrossed his legs, then looked at Inall, who stood beside him. "A medal."

Inall took a tablet from his coat's pocket. "Noted, sir. Sergeant Verity Jaye from Vimilia."

Then the girl would get two medals since Max was positive Bertoldo Whinen would not let an opportunity like this to boast the prowess of his people to pass by.

"That was impressive." Rezzu set his teacup on the small table between them. "For how long are we planning to extend this?" The tone wasn't exactly of annoyance, but Max could not truly identify it.

"Inall, why don't you take Miss Ukwosu and give her a tour of the blimp? When you're done, you two stay in the control room until summoned."

The tall Colviri woman arched an eyebrow. She searched her captain's eyes. "*Vudacus Muselet, kefo dulovo vellodde.*"

"It's all right, Ukwosu," Rezzu told her in common language. "*Govekor dosallepe,*" he added.

"I know that last word. It's redheaded. I hope he didn't order her to kill me," Inall whispered in Max's ear.

"That would defeat the whole purpose of this exercise, Inall. Do not worry." Max patted his assistant's hand.

Man and woman left the parlor, the door closing with a soft click. Max went to his feet and made the short distance between them and the ornate windows easily. He appreciated the acrobatics of the controllers and the flashes of light from explosions and rays for a couple of heartbeats. He turned around, leaning on the windowsill and crossing his arms over his chest. "Alone at last."

Rezzu had taken his teacup for another drink; he froze midmovement at Max's words. The teacup returned to the table, and Rezzu stood up. He stretched his neck, tilting his head first to the right then to the left, both movements accompanied by muffled cracks. He moved like a giant predator, and the black of his uniform emphasized this impression. Cracking his knuckles as he reached Max, he rested his hands on the windowsill, caging him. "I'm sure you'll find a way to make it interesting."

Their lips were a hairsbreadth away, but it was Rezzu's eyes that mesmerized Max. His actions had seemed determined, beyond confident, but those two suns didn't shine like they usually did. Something was guarded, and it deflated some of Max's ardor. The ambassador's closeness was a toxin, a thing he should avoid at all cost, alas his wayward body was overtaking his thought process. Clutching that last sliver of control like a lifeline, he put his hand on Rezzu's cheek. "You can say it. Whatever it is, we will deal with it together."

The handsome face leaned into his touch, and Rezzu sighed. "I don't know how to act around you. I tell myself I need to be professional and be a captain and do my duty to my planet. Nevertheless, the moment I'm in front of you all I want to do is grab you, squeeze you, eat you alive. It's pure madness, and I don't want to be a madman." A flame burst in those strange eyes. "This is not a spell, right? This attraction, this craziness it's just you, your voice, your eyes, the way you move, nothing else."

Softly, Max shook his head. "I haven't done anything. I promise you I'll never use magic to control you." He arched an eyebrow and added (because his mouth didn't know when to stop as usual), moving his free hand over his length, "I have all this to do that."

The chuckle lifted and (at the same time) squeezed something in Max's chest, like being buffeted by a harsh wind, dreading it and loving it in the same breath.

Whoops and cheers from below the blimp made them look outside. The two smaller warkites had sandwiched one Colviri aircraft, forcing it toward the ground, using their magic shields as leverage. Max swiveled within Rezzu's arms with a deafening, "NO." He wrenched both warkites from the Colviri and willed it to make a one-eighty back to the sky.

Rezzu squeezed him from behind. "You know there's no one inside the ship."

Max felt stupid. "I forgot." He rested his forehead on the glass. "You don't know how to act around me? Hah. I'm so distracted by you I end up doing shit like that."

"Is that a bad thing?"

"It's not a good one so far."

Two Colviri crafts had managed to accomplish the same sandwich maneuver, but, instead of guiding the warkite to the empty space between the

two forces, they were aiming for the Alettans on the ground. That would fuck things beyond reparation.

*“Dulok oneh ubbukeh eulu!”* Rezzu shouted as he dislodged from Max. *“Dominik eulu!”*

The three ships changed course and, at a safe distance from the Alettan army, spliced.

“Do we call it a tie?” Max grimaced, a little aroused by Rezzu’s panting and his hand on his ear, still pressing the linkdev; it made his bicep bulge tantalizingly.

“You do that,” Rezzu hissed, “I’m going to find out who came up with that fantastic idea.” He did an about-face and zigzagged through chaises and low tables away from Max.

*Ugh, I wouldn’t want to be in those boots right now.*

Max had never been a fan of the tiny linking devices one used inserted in the ear, but he pressed his own linkdev to contact the Alettan forces on the ground. “Commander Mar, game over. It’s a tie.”

“Was that to be the result from the beginning, Governor?” Mar didn’t sound amused. Max could totally see her frowning. She didn’t wait for his answer. “What do I tell the representatives?”

“They will have their answers by nightfall.”

“I’ll let them know, Governor.”

“Good,” he said, closing the link. Rezzu was yelling in Colviri. Max couldn’t understand a word, but he was sure ninety percent of what was coming out of Rezzu’s delicious mouth were outrageous expletives. Rezzu wasn’t aware that the crash would have not caused any casualties (they had enough trained people to deflect such maneuvers within their ranks), but the intention behind it would have damaged any hope of appeasing the cities.

“To the brig, both of them!” Rezzu had spoken in common language, surely for Max’s benefit. Whoever was on the other end said something, and Rezzu replied, “I’ll get back to you later.” He turned around, and his expression changed from open hostility to sudden calm as he laid eyes on Max. He released the linkdev and spread his hands. “Please have a seat.”

It was odd to be offered a seat on his own blimp, but Max didn’t argue. The battle sounds had died, and now the only thing disturbing the silence between

them was the quiet hum of the engines. Rezzu put a hand up, silently asking Max to wait until he was ready to start.

Forefinger and thumb pinched the bridge of Rezzu's nose for a moment; then he took a deep breath, lifting his face to address Max. "More than thirty standard years ago, a dust plague decimated the population of Nova Gaia. As people were dying, there were all kinds of accidents and many places ended up in ruins. Long after that, we're talking years here, a rescue mission finally came to take the survivors to another planet. One of my fathers, Darien Wanao, at the time Muselet, was the captain of the mission on behalf of the Cygnus Federation.

"Previous to that, he had met my other father Kekoa Muselet, then Wanao, on the planet of my ancestors and discovered that they were mates. *Yes, as in destined to be together.* But this was not to happen because the federation had her sights on Colvis, Kekoa's planet, and thus they were separated, add to this the fact that the Colviri regularly live more than two thousand standard years, so the situation seemed very grim. As the Nova Gaian rescue mission progressed, the vessels were attacked, and Darien and my two uncles, Sule and Alaric, escaped in a pod. Due to technical issues they ended up far from the other survivors, but Kekoa always had people following Darien, and these men took my father and uncles to Mireeh, my home planet. Mireeh is protected by natural defenses—instruments would read it as a black hole, and for many eons the Colviri lived without paying attention to the rest of the galaxy. Darien didn't know he had Kekoa's tracker in him, but the federation had discovered it and didn't say anything, waiting to use it against Kekoa."

Max was confused. It was an interesting story, but he didn't see what any of it had to do with Aletta.

"To make a really long story short, the Cygnus Federation lost the following war, but Colvis was destroyed and, in reparation, Nova Gaia was ceded to the Colviri. My uncles became regents of the planet and started its reconstruction. Recently, records of an ancient, unauthorized expedition off planet, surfaced as an old building was demolished. The recs spoke of a greedy Nova Gaian entrepreneur who had sent scouts and found a planet so rich in resources it was a businessman's wet dream. He didn't alert the adequate agencies but used his own funds to establish a *one-thousand-worker* extraction colony on the planet. Little by little any Nova Gaian involved with the expedition was bribed or killed, and soon the existence of the colony became unknown. According to the docs found, he solely controlled every aspect of the enterprise—dispatch,

reception, everything. The man became one of the richest men of Nova Gaia. It's not clear how or why, but years later he lost all his money and committed suicide, taking with him his knowledge."

"That's why we were abandoned—he died." Max covered his mouth with his hand. The greed of one single man had condemned his people to live separated and forgotten.

"Yes," Rezzu moved and knelt between Max's legs. "Our mission was to find out what happened to the people that bastard left stranded here. We didn't have too much hope after four hundred years of separation, but you survived and thrived." He caressed Max's cheek softly. "I should have told you this as soon as we landed, but I wasn't prepared. I'm a soldier. This diplomatic interaction mess was dumped in my lap without warning."

The sumptuous room disappeared. Max felt suspended in midair, frighteningly floating toward a whirlpool of contradicting emotions: the blessed closure of knowing and the revulsion that knowledge brought. A truly dark seed had begotten the fate of his planet. That's why they had never been able to be completely at peace with each other; greed and all the sickness it carried were the cornerstones of their destiny.

Hands shook him by the arms. "Come back to me, Max." Rezzu's voice latched at him, pulling him from the abyss of shame drowning him. "It's the past, let it go. Let it go."

The two suns were wide like plates, strangely beautiful and uplifting. Max focused on them, to float upward, to be rescued. As he surfaced he threw his arms around Rezzu's neck, holding fast for dear life. He sobbed, "Thank you, thank you."

Rezzu pried Max from his neck.

And the universe siphoned into one single space.

That tiny place where their lips touched.

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## 11. ESSENCE

Since he was the offended party, the six representatives had come to see him—on his ship. They had marveled about the *Oculus*, and expressed (albeit each one in their own way) how deeply sorry the cities were for mistrusting the Colviri's intentions and a thousand more inane apologies. Rezzu had replicated the records that brought the Colviri to Aletta, so they all left with the information to do with it as they saw fit.

Max sat at the far end of the circular sofa, once they moved from Rezzu's formal office to his quarters. He had taken his coat and hat off and loosened his cravat. "I thought they would never leave."

"I'm glad you stayed."

"I just hope they don't start shooting each other's blimps on their way back. I don't know who incited the army assembly, but they will not lose time to start blaming one another."

"Let's pray for the best." Rezzu moved closer to Max; his uniform was suddenly hot and he was twitchy all over. "I have had a question nagging me long before I set foot on Aletta." He took two deep breaths and continued. "Why didn't your people try to find their way back once communications and support were interrupted?"

"I don't have a concrete answer for that. My theory is that they either thought something really wrong happened back on Nova Gaia, thus there was no point in going back, or had discovered the magic of the planet already and didn't want to lose it."

"So if you leave the planet, it's gone?"

"That's the conclusion of most scholars. I mean no one has left the planet ever. There hadn't been a way to prove it."

Then Rezzu would not be able to ask Max to come with him. How would he romance this man? How would he make Max fall in love with him? They knew they wanted each other, but that wasn't enough. He wanted a love like his parents'.

Those pale green eyes that made him feel demented (and at home in the same breath) stared at him. "Speaking of magic. Will you accept your wand back?" Max drew a tiny cylinder from his pocket and it enlarged in his palm.

Rezzu narrowed his eyes and joked, “Do I really need it? I’ve seen you do magic without one, like four times.” Now he was sure that the seeds Max had given him for Luddi, that far away day, had been summoned magically.

“Oh, that.” Max looked like he had been caught withholding information again. “Not everybody can wield magic without a wand.”

“But you don’t have one.”

“I don’t have one, at the moment. I lost it.”

“Well, keep mine, until you get a new one.”

“It’s not that easy. Yours will never work completely right for me because it resonates with you, with your essence. Your name brought it to life. After your first wand, other considerations have to be taken to create one for you.”

“Sweet Lady of the Shields! How many wands have you lost?”

“Twenty-one,” came out in a little voice, almost imperceptible if you weren’t expecting an answer.

Rezzu considered this information for a moment. He ran a hand down his face and sighed. “All right, mine has river stone in it. What would you need, a piece of this ship? I’m sure none of its parts are made from materials that could be found in Aletta. We have some plants too.”

Max shook his head. He reminded Rezzu of a child fighting not to take a bitter medicine. “None of it will work.”

Setting the wand in Max’s hand aside, Rezzu stroke Max’s trembling fingers. “How can I help you? Tell me.”

“No, Rezzu. What I need for my new wand might mean that I’d not be able to see you again. I’ll fake it till I’m able to sort it out. Luckily, I had a ban on people showing their magic around the Colviri. There’s no point for that now, and soon I will be forced to do something using a wand. But you know what? I’m a big boy—I’ll find a way.”

“You told me, less than five standard hours ago, when you didn’t know what was troubling me, that whatever it was we could deal with it together. What’s the difference now?”

“The difference is,” Max growled, and with each word his tone rose and became angrier, “for my next wand the core must be something from *my other half!*” He stood up and flailed his arms. “What if what I’m feeling is wrong,

what if it's all an illusion, and you are not what my heart keeps struggling to accept?"

Rezzu appreciated how perfect Max looked surrounded by his things—in his quarters; his emerald trousers, golden waistcoat, and cream shirt a beautiful contrast with the dark tones of his furniture. He stood up and caught up with Max, turning him by the shoulders to face him. "Let's make love."

"What?"

"Yes, let's make love and be inside each other at least once. Then we could go to Master Esaw, and if I'm not your other half, I'll go quietly with your memory in my body to last me a lifetime."

"No. No." Max tried to shrug Rezzu off. "I'm not going anywhere. I'm afraid to find out."

"I learned a long time ago that if I didn't have answers, I needed to be open to the wisdom of others." Rezzu kissed Max's furrowed brow. "Wouldn't it be worse if we stayed close to each other for weeks or months and then find out we are not meant to be together? Wouldn't that break our hearts irreparably? As we are now, we could have this moment of happiness and cherish it afterward if we must part ways, and still be able to heal and accept others in our lives." Although, Rezzu knew he was already very much broken for love if he couldn't be around Max. It was a certainty he didn't like, but one he'd fearlessly deal with if the time came to that. He loosened Max's cravat completely and let the soft fabric slowly find its way to the floor, lightly swinging as it went downward. "Please."

Max closed his eyes and tipped his head backward, his lips slightly parted, perhaps struggling to accept Rezzu's offer, perhaps finding the courage to refuse. The robotic neck sparkled for an instant in the bright light of the room with the movement, and Rezzu kissed it. Warm metal welcomed his lips, and a moan escaped Max. Rezzu unbuttoned the silk waistcoat, his mouth still gliding over the metallic surface, and Max's hands went to Rezzu's shoulders, gripping as if to claw resolution and strength out of them.

Then Rezzu remembered what his sperm would do to Max's DNA. This was the thing that could forbid them to be together right now, but he needed to come clean. Perhaps spinning it like a good thing would be the best approach. He took Max's face between his hands and caressed lightly colored cheeks in circular motions. "There's one thing you should know about the Colviri."

Green skies stared at Rezzu.

“Our life span is a lot longer than humans, more than two thousand standard years.” Rezzu murmured softly. He let the information sink in.

As Rezzu had foreseen, Max grasped the implications of the information fast. “So even if we’re meant to be together it would be briefly. How can your human father stand it?”

“My human father will live as long as any Colviri.”

“How?” A spark of hope burst in Max’s eyes.

“Our life cells affect human DNA, transforming it till it becomes Colviri DNA.”

“Well, I guess transfusions are not a big deal.” Max sounded relieved.

Rezzu shook his head. “It’s not blood.”

The green skies widened in surprise. “Oh. You meant sperm.”

“I want you inside me as much as I want to be inside you. But once I’ve come in you I might be adding a couple of hundred years to your life span and making you stronger than a regular human.”

A wicked expression flourished on Max’s face. His hands rested on Rezzu’s waist. He smirked, “All that with a single dose?”

“Who said we were going to stop at one?”

“True.” Max closed his eyes and opened his lips slightly again, but this time inviting Rezzu.

After a brutal kiss, the governor’s waistcoat followed his cravat. Rezzu pulled Max’s shirt out of his trousers with the same slow upward motions his lips were following before over the masculine chin. The sound erupting from Max was a disturbing hybrid between a growl and a groan, but it brought the confirmation Rezzu was desperately expecting.

“I’ll take my chances.” Max hooked a finger on the neck of Rezzu’s uniform and pulled—his eyes like blazes and his cruel mouth in a firm grin that was sheer determination, pure exhilaration.

After that, it became a battle to see who got the other naked first. Limbs entwined and mouths snarled. Rezzu found an iota of control to emerge from the unleashed, straggly passion drowning his midnight bed, four heartbeats after

he'd discovered a magnificent peacock feather tattoo winding up Max's left calf. "Commander Czech."

Max froze, his teeth latched to one of Rezzu's nipples. It was as if Rezzu had stopped in mid action a video of a wild animal as it devoured its prey.

"Captain?"

"I do not wish to be disturbed. If the ground opens below us, *you* take care of it."

"Aye, Captain. No one will disturb you until you contact us again."

His rosy nipple was still between white teeth, and the flash in those sky green eyes and the almost feral grin were astonishingly beautiful. Rezzu chuckled, "As you were, Governor."

The mechanical hand pinched his other nipple, and the combined effect of teeth and brass had Rezzu writhing in undiluted fire. His own hands found flesh and metal, to grab, to knead, to destroy, and it was in that solar instant when Max's lips trailed down his abdomen to kiss his cock, the full weight of his prophecy dawned on him.

*Feathers like eyes*

*Metal and flesh*

*Unruly heart*

*Virtuous mage*

It all clicked in, and Rezzu thought of stopping, of telling Max this confirmation, the discovery, but molten pleasure enveloped his cock. A solid throat closed around its tip, and a metal finger sought his mouth, and Rezzu sucked on the brass and the heat, lost and found.

Seconds became minutes and minutes became eons as Max bobbed over Rezzu's cock. Rezzu could not take his eyes away from the magic, from the devastating beauty of those lips wrapped around his length. The green skies opened and closed intermittently, as if unable to decide whether to stay shut and savor the thickness, the texture, or stay wide and enjoy the vision of Rezzu's own lips wrapped around Max's finger.

With a mischievous, arched eyebrow, Max slowly pulled off Rezzu's cock. "You taste so good, I could keep like this forever. But I want more." And before Rezzu could grasp what was happening, Max had used his incredible

force to grab him by the legs, turning him around and burying his face between Rezzu's ass cheeks.

His last few coherent thoughts fled Rezzu's mind as the million sensations concentrating on his cock a heartbeat earlier spread over his body as tiny constant electric shocks, speeding away from his burning hole. And the attack was so delicious, so powerful, he lifted his body to stand on all fours and push and counterattack, seeking a deeper connection, his long braid almost strangling him due to the abrupt motion. "Oh fuck yes, that hole is yours."

A chuckle reverberated through Rezzu's cheeks like the ripples of a happy stone skimming its favorite lake, and Rezzu shuddered. He wanted to be disarmed, razed, shattered. The demolishing power of Max's intent had him crawling until there was no more room to advance, and little by little his upper body ended up touching his cabin wall, the cold surface silently calming the sweltering currents running through him. His sideways face and clammy hands were flush against the hard cooling surface when something like a wind moved about him, and Rezzu felt his braid go up as if handled by invisible deft fingers, becoming undone.

Rezzu groaned and roared and begged to be destroyed while his snowy hair cascaded over his shoulders and down, down till it covered his butt and Max's face—falling leaves saying good-bye to their tree. He didn't know if it was magic or the brutal strength of Max's enhancements and passion but he was lifted, his ankles used as leverage, and his body bent, folding him into an upended fetal position, his darkest treasure exposed and willing at the mercy of teeth and tongue.

His head spun, his vision blurred, and he fought to record every speck of stimulation bombarding him like a meteor rain. He was ready to succumb, to explode, to become smithereens when the same unseen fingers that had unbraided his hair circled around his balls and shaft, an invisible cock ring holding his climax at bay. This turned his attention to the steady trickle of precum running down his dick and testicles. He was sure it was dripping over Max's chest, and the image made him tremble with renewed spasms of crushing ardor.

"Not yet," floated a growl from below. "Not until you're inside me."

Max's grip on his ankles vanished, but Rezzu remained suspended in that undignified but maddeningly erotic position. A flat tongue languorously swept over his ready-to-be-annihilated hole, continued in a straight upward motion,

between his cheeks, over his coccyx, and traced the line of his spine, his hair parting equal to a curtain revealing a stage. At the same time, real hands caressed the back of his thighs, cupping his ass and spreading it, until the now familiar and welcome presence of a brass finger entered his well-worked entrance. It was a smooth breach; it had some kind of lubrication, and (since Rezzu knew Max's mouth was busy somewhere else) the knowledge that it was his own fluids aiding the assault, made Rezzu swear fervently.

The man who ruled not only Anatolia but with each passing heartbeat more and more of Rezzu's body and mind kissed the base of Rezzu's neck, then whispered with a grave, hungry tone. "You're going to fuck me... hard... until no other name can escape my lips... until you flood me with your seed... until I'm nothing but a squirming mass belonging only to you." Each word punctuated by the brass piston moving languidly but relentlessly far below—where their bodies connected, where their frontiers dissolved.

Rezzu didn't trust his voice and jerkily nodded, but true to his essence, true to everything he had shown Rezzu until that moment, Max uttered a low hiss, "Say it."

"I-I'm going to fuck you."

"Say it like you mean it."

And the beast inside Rezzu, who had been prowling quietly, leashed by his intention of letting Max take control, broke its chains and sprang, recognizing his other half and roared deafeningly, "I'M GOING TO FUCK YOU UNTIL YOU'RE MINE FOREVER."

Everything holding Rezzu in place snapped, and (before his feet were able to touch the bed) he swiveled.

The beast pounced.

Max's raucous laughter was a thousand times better than any cry of fear.

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## 12. TRANSMUTATION

He was blind. He needed his sight back because all the sensations stroking, attacking, torturing each of his cells were too much, too many to not see and enjoy their origin. He fought with the blindness; the blindness that came from the pleasure, from the heat. No other man's touch had ever turned him into this blind pile of happiness. Then Max remembered.

The only thing he needed to do to be back in the light was to open his eyes, to find that shred of control to command his body to obey, but it was hard. He was wrapped in a tangle of his own limbs, of other hands, another mouth conquering him, giving him pleasure beyond anything he had known before. And still the final act of submission had yet to occur. And that burning center, amid all the sweltering devastation, wanted to be mauled, overwhelmed, ripped apart.

He knew the lips around his cock, he knew the fingers kneading his frame, but he wanted more. He wanted, no, he needed this other cock that had been in his own mouth to enter him, from a different angle, with a more demanding intention.

A sole particle of control, perhaps the child of a single unperturbed and still-working neuron, swam up from the abyss his brain had become to find his coherent voice (because the only things escaping him were the guttural noises of a rutting animal), and Max cried out almost like a single word, "C'MON, REZZU. FUCK ME ALREADY."

And laughter was what made him finally open his eyes; to look at those smiling features, to lose himself in those bright yellow suns that watched him with adoration, to appreciate the swollen lips hovering above his face. The deep voice of Rezzu Ki Muselet stroked Max inside and out, "Is that an order, Governor?"

Max didn't know which one he liked better, the submissive ambassador or the mischievous captain. Both were so distinctive, two different faces of the same invaluable coin. He was irremediably attracted to these incongruent facets equally, and he was determined to savor them infinitely. He growled, "Yes, it is." And his hole added, "Severe punishment is coming your way if you don't fuck me soon."



Rezzu gave him a quick peck. “Aye, aye, sir.” He moved backward and lifted Max’s legs, positioning both ankles together over one of his shoulders, angling Max slightly sideways.

The wet head of Rezzu’s cock teased Max’s hole, lateral swipes, circular swipes, up and down swipes. Each stroke breached him a little, and he pushed and thrashed and moaned, the firm hold of Rezzu over his legs limiting his actions and greatly pissing him off.

The grin was maddening and endearing. Max opened his mouth to curse Rezzu out, and the words transformed before they could leave him into a long breathless groan. Rezzu was inching his way in, pulling Max’s hip toward him, his head tipped back, his hiss infuriatingly erotic.

White, silky hairs caressed Max’s entrance; the rock wall of Rezzu’s sweaty chest dampened the back of his thighs, and the fullness of the thick Colviri cock made Max feel complete—irrevocably happy and ready to be redeemed.

“Please, please, move,” Max begged, his head tossing.

But the solid mountain stayed immobile, aside from the measured rise and fall of his breathing. After a moment that seemed suspended in time where their eyes drilled each other, Rezzu asked with a smirk, “You sure you want this?”

What kind of question was that when he was to the hilt inside Max? “Fuck yes. Do I have to say it in Colviri?”

The hold of Rezzu over Max’s hip had relaxed a little, making the cock slide minimally out of his stretched hole, and Rezzu gave a hard tug to regain all his terrain back. “That would be something.”

“You fucker.”

“Your fucker.” And with those two slow uttered words the battering began.

Each thrust was agony and bliss and stars. Rezzu undulated. Rezzu gyrated. The hand not holding his legs roamed Max’s torso and arms. Fingers veered to trace Max’s lips, and he kissed them, silently asking to suck them, to taste them. Rezzu obliged, and soon Max’s tongue was busy circling and gliding as he copied his lover’s movements below.

His climax steadily approached, Rezzu’s piston bringing it about with resolute passion. His legs were parted, now each resting over one shoulder, and Rezzu licked the feather tattoo over Max’s calf, his tongue flat as if trying to encompass the entire expanse at once. With his gaze hawk-like upon Max, he

murmured, “Feathers like eyes.” He folded Max over, never ceasing his ramming, his tongue finding Max’s neck sliding upward until it reached his ear, “Metal and flesh.”

Lips softly met, a whispered brush, and Rezzu straightened himself, both hands around Max’s ankles, powerful and beautiful as Max imagined that ancient man, Samson, must have looked between the columns of his enemies’ temple. More lower stabs, and Rezzu’s right hand slithered down, leaving a trail of fire in its wake until it rested over Max’s chest, “Unruly heart.” He smiled, and Max wanted to sob, to let tears of happiness run freely.

The hand over his frantic heart continued its journey, caressing its way toward his cock and closing around it, impossibly delicate and seemingly afraid of scaring a cornered animal. And with perfect synchrony, Rezzu pumped and plunged. The magic flowed from Max’s every pore, and its emerging force made Rezzu’s long translucent hair drift like an underwater creature, the myriad tendrils of a marvelous gift.

Those blazing eyes were exploding supernovas. Rezzu inclined his head as if conceding a point, agreeing with an unknown revelation. “Virtuous mage.” From afar, the words seemed coherent to Max, like something long forgotten and brought to the front of his mind by a sudden revelation. A curse, a blessing—a prophecy that was ready to become real, that needed to come forth.

Rezzu’s grip on Max’s cock became painful, the penetration erratic. Once, twice, thrice, and he screamed, “Mine.”

Every jet ignited, sparked, and the sensation of the flood burst Max’s orgasm, his own cry the echo of Rezzu’s, “Mine.” And they floated and spun and forgot where they were, surrounded by light, pierced by heaven, entwined forever.

They descended, spongy clouds touching the mountain’s summit, and Rezzu carefully slid out and climbed him, impaling himself on Max’s unyielding cock. He rocked and squeezed and kissed Max, oblivious to their recent completion. Nevertheless, the magic was there with them, nurturing and titillating, rousing their bodies back to an immediate peak.

“We belong together.” Rezzu’s words were not a plea but a confirmation as he grabbed Max’s face with both hands and devoured him with mouth and hole.

Amid the assault Max agreed, “I know.” And another climax neared, impossibly higher and astonishingly brighter than the previous.

*Will it always be like this?*

And his brain, and his heart, and his testicles gave him the answer in a furious eruption that had him howling and heaving, animal and man—individual and yet utterly united to the being coming with him.

Some of Rezzu's cum had landed on Max's chin, and his captain, his ambassador licked it playfully. "Good thing I told them to stay put because we sounded like a massacre."

"Yeah. There should be blood spatters all over the walls."

They looked at each other for a fraction of a heartbeat—and cracked up like a couple of looneys on their way to be institutionalized.

*Two standard hours later...*

After showering and eating (sex always made Max hungry but in the aftermath of the Rezzu Experience he'd been frankly famished), his carriage was en route to Merchant Street. Contrary to the first time, this time Rezzu wasn't nervous or upset, and he took time to ask Max about the craftsmanship and features of their transport before they climbed on. His fingers had traced the etched relief of the sleek metal alloy used for the body, and he had marveled as Max opened the hood located on the side to show him the complex mechanism with its gears and pistons.

"I still don't understand magic as fuel."

This was the part where any other Alettan would flick his wand to start the ignition. This wasn't the first time he didn't have his wand so it didn't faze him. He explained first. "See those tubes there? They contain modified water. Magic heats them to create the steam to put the engine in motion. The gas doesn't escape but returns to the tubes, thus maintaining a constant cycle as long as you have the vehicle in use."

"Amazing," Rezzu murmured.

"With bigger engines, like those of a blimp for example, we add coal dust to the modified water to make the steam stronger due to the volatile heavy molecules, making it easier to propel bigger gears." He concentrated, and the liquid instantly bubbled and evaporated, the machine purring eagerly.

His driver, perched on the high seat in front of the carriage, guffawed, "Lord Governor, you shouldn't be doing that, you almost gave this old man a heart attack."

“So sorry, Byron. I was showing the mechanism to my...” Max dithered for a moment. He wanted to use a deeply meaningful word, but he wasn’t sure if he had that right yet. “...to the ambassador.”

Rezzu smiled, noticing his quick bout of discomfort. “We’ll find an appropriate term for each other soon enough.”

“Oh, don’t mind me, sir. I’m just a whiny old nag.”

Max inclined his head, acknowledging Rezzu’s comment and called to Byron, “Oh stop it, you have many years ahead of you. Now please take us to Master Esaw’s.”

“Lost another wand, Governor?”

“No,” Max offered easily, “We’re getting one for the ambassador.”

“I guess we can do magic in front of them now then...”

“Indeed. And we don’t want to be late for our appointment.”

“I’ll get you there in a jiffy, m’lord.”

“Thank you,” Max rolled his eyes, out of Rezzu’s sight, as he entered the carriage behind those broad shoulders.

They sat, facing each other, and Rezzu said the following words with a seriousness Max had only seen during their first encounter, “Did it ever occur to you that you keep losing your wand because you don’t really need one? Why force yourself to use something external when your own body is the perfect conductor?”

That was something to consider. None of them said another word until they arrived at their destination.

The thin, smiling wandmaster greeted them outside his shop with open arms, his multi-lensed spectacles on top of his graying head. “It’s a pleasure to see you again, Lord Governor, please come in, come in.” The bow of his navy blue ribbon was bigger than usual, and Max had to suppress childish urge to giggle imagining it flying away—pulling tiny Master Esaw to the sky with silk flappy wings.

They went straight to the back where the master put the wands together. “So what did you bring from the elusive other half?” the steady voice asked without preamble, eyeing Rezzu as if seeing him for the first time and truly appreciating his beauty.

Max cleared his throat, but it was Rezzu who answered after stopping him with a raised hand. He pulled several hairs from the top of his head. "If you need more just let me know."

"Oh, magnificent," cooed Esaw. "This is more than enough, Ambassador." He proffered a slim glass vial, and Rezzu deposited his hairs in it. "So luminescent," marveled the wandmaker, bringing his spectacles down and adjusting lenses to examine the hairs more deeply. He closed the tube with a cork and rummaged through several boxes, drawing three unfinished wands from different shelves.

"This is exciting." Rezzu reminded Max of a little boy learning how his favorite candy was made.

The three wands were placed on a table. Max had been through this process before, so he focused on not calling one wand but on letting the magic flow freely to allow one to rise on its own to him. With Rezzu's expectant eyes on him, he slowly waved his hand over the open cylinders; he let the happiness rushing through his veins after being in Rezzu's arms to be the summoner of his next wand, the last one he would ever use, if the idea fluttering in his head came to fruition. However, it wasn't the time to diverge to future plans, he needed his essence calling out to the magic.

One or two standard minutes passed, and the left one levitated gracefully toward his hand. Max gave it to Master Esaw.

"How interesting?" Commented the old man as he inspected it.

"Something wrong?"

"No, not really. It's Alettan silver, though. The magic had never chosen this material for you before. It had always fluctuated between a three-colored gold alloy and rose iron. Something must have changed in you recently."

The fire was not only on his cheeks. His entire body was ablaze. How undiplomatic of him to be embarrassed in this moment, and the twinkle in Rezzu's solar eyes didn't help a bit.

"Very well, m'lords. Please make yourselves comfortable in the waiting room. The next phase is not for mortal eyes..." Master Esaw chuckled cheekily. His wife materialized as if she had been just waiting for this moment all along. "Please follow me, Lord Governor, Lord Ambassador."

"Alettan silver, huh?" Rezzu almost singsonged, and pushed Max with his shoulder.

“How odd, right?”

“Yeah, I wonder what has changed...”

Rezzu’s fake air of wishful trepidation was absolutely annoying.

And Max loved every second of it.

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### 13. BLOSSOMS

Midnight orchids bloomed in Rezzu's hair. He snickered, "Really, flowers?"

"I'd have you know those are very masculine flowers, dark and sensual."

Two standard days ago, Max had conjured a giant mirror above the massive bed from somewhere else in the palace. Rezzu saw his reflection, and the deep purple orchids sprinkled about his widespread hair reminded him of blossoms floating over a lake.

"You shouldn't have done that. They might have cheered someone else in whatever garden you plucked them from." Rezzu shook his head without heat.

"They'd have ended up in some forgotten vase anyway. And they are *cheering me up*."

Rezzu had learned that things weren't created out of thin air; you needed to know where they were to bring them up. He thought of something his father had given him on his twentieth birthday, and that, luckily for him, wasn't all the way back on Mireeh. He stretched his hand and took his wand, giving it a flick.

"Sweet 'verse, Rezzu, this is magnificent!" Max tilted his torso backward to appreciate the burgundy corundum crystals necklace Rezzu had placed on him. The movement made his naked bottom rub deliciously over Rezzu's rapidly interested cock.

The minute gems encased in the dense gold of Vartian, one of the twenty-seven moons of Mireeh, contrasted beautifully with the brass of Max's neck and his perfect, tanned skin. They smiled at each other in the mirror.

"I give you flowers, and you give me jewelry."

"Flowers are nature's most perfect jewels. They are so special they don't even last forever; thus you enjoy them more because they are finite. They become the essence of a special moment."

"If I'd know you had such a poetic vein, I'd have fallen quicker." Max whispered, covering Rezzu's chest with his own and kissing him; the weight of the necklace over Rezzu's Adam's apple fathered goose bumps.

"No, you wouldn't. Diplomats are egotistical, hardcore narcissists," Rezzu ventured full of mirth.

“Oh, I’m gonna show you how egotistical I can be.” The arched eyebrow signaled the start of a challenge.

“Are you now? Ohhh...” Pearly teeth latched on Rezzu’s nipple as the warm pleasure of Max’s robotic hand trailed down his flank, over his hip and grasped both cocks in a metallic cocoon.

“Uh-huh.”

“So damn selfish...” Rezzu sighed while Max changed position to stretch his body along Rezzu’s without stopping the rhythmic stroking of their united shafts.

Max let the nipple rest for a heartbeat. “Yeah, it’s not even funny. I know...” He didn’t return to the swollen nub though. He changed course and traced Rezzu’s abs with his tongue, releasing their now hard-as-steel-columns cocks.

“More selfishness, please.”

Four licks. “Is that an order?”

“Ahhh, I don’t think I’m capable of ordering you around.” Rezzu squirmed.

His cock head was swallowed for only an instant, a swirling tongue making him see stars. “Glad you’re aware of your limitations.” This time his cock was devoured completely; Max’s lips grazed Rezzu’s balls. A happy hum vibrated through his manhood. A hot throat closed around his glans.

Rezzu was getting ready to emit another incongruent quip when a brass finger found his hole. He hissed encouragingly, “Egoist.”

Emerging again from the deep fellation, Max summarized, “I wish I could bottle the way you taste.” He licked his inflamed lips.

It wasn’t the words but the joyful tone that made Rezzu tremble, each body part turning ablaze, each cell surging toward a drowning climax. He wanted to fight. He needed this to last longer, but in little time Max had learned how to play him, discovered the complicated password to break him—to make him scream and writhe.

Max moved in that easy and quick way of his (that always left Rezzu breathless) and sat on his haunches; he pulled Rezzu to his lap by the hip and grabbed his cock, the invading finger unstoppable. Hand and digit became a well-oiled machine, pumping and stroking, piercing and twisting.



Dark orchids rose and started to swirl in an incomprehensible pattern amid his drifting hair while his body tossed helplessly. The million horses galloping to his center collided, and his orgasm gushed free, violent and perfect, accompanied by a long, strained howl in the form of Max's name.

Long seconds later, his breathing decided to come back, and Rezzu opened his eyes. Max licked each one of his fingers, sending chills down Rezzu's spine. The apologetic grin was unconvincing. "I was supposed to use that as lubricant... Well, here's more." He scooped the semen along Rezzu's torso, and flesh replaced brass, wrenching a hissing moan from him. "I'm going to fuck you so hard, the constellations will guide you home." Max commented happily as fingers coated Rezzu's insides, hungrily preparing him.

By now, Rezzu was used to the magic taking care of his exhaustion. His body was alert and ready, raring to go again; this time expanded and full thanks to Max's cock.

A wicked grin coincided with the first nudge, and it became wider as Max inched his way in, using Rezzu's hips as levers, turning him into a squirming mass of delight, fluid and bright. Pubic hair grazed his hole; Rezzu squeezed, and Max groaned, tilting his head backward, the metal of his neck exploding with blinding rays. He pulled out a little and slid back inside, and with each following heartbeat the speed and the force increased until it was just drilling and rocking, pleasure and sparks.

Rezzu's primal-self surged, eager to join the fracas, and he pushed, wanting to receive more, to take more. With his legs circled firmly around Max's waist, Rezzu did a defensive maneuver and turned the governor around in three quick movements. Max ended up on his back with Rezzu riding ferociously. Max let out a string of profanities and finished with, "I thought I was the one doing the fucking."

*And I was letting you.*

But that thing that was all animal (all starving instinct) thought otherwise, and Rezzu dismounted and moved forward, shoving his rocky, dripping cock into Max's mouth. He saw the green skies roll back. His own eyes wanting to do the same, but they stayed glued to the image, mesmerized by the raw beauty of Max's cheeks hollowing to suck (tasting him, welcoming him). He guided his cock with one hand and stroked the one behind using the other. He would return to it soon because the tide grew, and that explosion was meant to happen with him impaled, each jet conquering him.

Max pouted as Rezzu's cock left his mouth, but the pout became a pleasure "O" as Rezzu easily glided down his incandescent shaft. Two rolls, one squeeze... "OHHH REZZU."

"Fuck yesssss!" Thick ropes flew into Rezzu, out of Rezzu, and they rose and swirled, holding fast onto each other, laughing and letting the magic have its way with them.

As they descended, crushing orchids and still chuckling, Unos entered the bedroom and announced, "Max, Deas is here to see you."

"Seems like I'm finally meeting your best friend in person."

"Good thing you already learned how to braid your hair magically 'cause you're a mess."

"It's all your fault, you selfish ass."

"My ass wasn't even in this battle."

"And I'm going to take care of that." Rezzu swatted Max's chin with his close fist softly. "Trust me."

"We can tell Deas to come back."

"No." Rezzu tapped his finger over the silvery blue light between Max's pecs, encircled in a brass grommet. "Friend first, ass-mauling after."

Max scrunched his face and crossed his arms in a perfect imitation of a five-year-old denied candy. "You're no fun."

Pushing Max out of the bed, Rezzu spanked him. "I'll give you lots of fun later."

"Yay."

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## 14. HOPE

They entered the sitting room arm in arm and laughing.

“Oh.” Deas’s disapproval face surged so fast and retreated at the same speed, it left Max dizzy. He moved to his feet slowly and inclined his head. “Governor, Ambassador.”

Max disentangled from Rezzu and hugged his friend, whispering in his ear, “You need to stop that, you bitch.”

Their embrace became stiff. “I don’t like him.” Deas stated between his teeth.

“I’m going to beat you to a pulp.” Max pushed Deas at arm’s distance, without releasing him. “He makes me happy. Be fucking happy for me.” He growled.

Deas seemed deflated for a moment, then filled up again. “I don’t approve.”

“Blasting meteors! Do you hear yourself? Give me just one reason why this is so hard for you.”

“Ahem,” Rezzu cleared his throat. “May I intervene, Max?”

With a nod, Max let go of Deas, who stood frozen but wasn’t trying to disguise his discomfort. He could have been a good diplomat, because, when he wanted to, he could fake it like the best of them. That wasn’t the case now though.

“I’ve seen this before. I’ve seen it in my sister’s face and in others when they think someone they love is making a mistake.” Rezzu walked slowly toward Deas, a rescuer approaching a skittish, beaten animal. He took Deas hands in both of his, looking into those deep, blue eyes. “I promise you I’ll give the last drop of my blood to make Lairdimax Trean Maitheas the happiest man in the known universe. This is my solemn vow, please accept it.”

For a heartbeat, Max thought Rezzu would kneel, but he didn’t. That would have been just too much, and he would have had to punch Deas really hard for being obnoxious and forcing Rezzu to do such a thing.

Looking from Rezzu to Max several times, Deas finally grunted, “All right. I’m going to promise you something too. If I ever see my friend shed just one, hear me well, just one tear that is not from happiness, you’ll know pain.”

Rezzu assented with a crisp nod and pulled Deas into a crushing hug that left the other flailing to escape his grip. He let go and gave Deas a hard smack on the back. “Good thing Maith likes me. I wouldn’t be able to face two raging fathers.”

Deas elbowed Rezzu, who folded down—guffawing riotously.

A dispute resolved with a well-aimed elbow. How typical of their friendship. Max joined in their laughter, and they all sat. “Are you bringing me good news, now that the sour ones are gone?”

“I am.” Deas sobered up. “In the seven cities people are embracing the fact that we’re descendants of Nova Gaia positively. Even the Nova Gaians among Rezzu’s crew are changing their attitude toward our enhancements and magic. I personally think it is because they’re embarrassed one of their own pushed us to become what we are. Shame is a very powerful incentive to change people’s minds.”

“Maybe I need to shame your ass into not being such a jerk to my future husband.” Max offered from the corner of his mouth.

Both men looked as if struck by lightning.

“Oops. Right. I haven’t asked you yet.” Max snickered. He was the one who went to his knee in front of a flabbergasted Rezzu, conjuring the ring that had been sitting in his vault for the past two weeks, waiting for the right moment. “You said you’ll make me the happiest man in the known universe, so this is the next logical step. Would you marry me Rezzu Ki Muselet?”

Deas had one hand over his mouth, his eyes liquid. With the other he nudged Rezzu after several heartbeats in silence. “Hey.”

That seemed to bring Rezzu back from whatever petrified land he had been. He stood up, his head bobbing, and he grabbed Max by the waist, holding him up above him and twirling them both and crying, “Yes. Yes. Yes. A thousand times yes!”

Amid his flying in circles, Max saw Deas dabbing his eyes with a maroon handkerchief.

*Aww, the big, old softie.*

Ten standard days later, Max stood beside Rezzu as a ginormous Colviri vessel alighted over the Yerma Plains. It was a monstrosity, four times bigger than the behemoth that brought his husband-to-be—what seemed a many eons

ago occurrence. He was sweating and shivering, and, in other circumstances, he would have thought he was coming down with some exotic disease. Nevertheless, he knew it was pure unadulterated nerves. He, who had been able to thwart the snake pit of his planet's diplomacy, was a flickering leaf buffeted by a storm at the prospect of meeting Rezzu's family.

"Is that an earthquake?" Rezzu chuckled.

"Shut up. You had my family in your pocket from day one. This isn't fair."

"Ahh, you'll be fine. They won't eat you until after the ceremony as the tradition demands."

"I'm *so* telling Deas."

Humungous stairs descended, and the Alettan Guard advanced to take their position, creating a corridor toward where Rezzu, Max, and the Welcome Committee (formed by delegations of all the city-states) stood. From the ship, Colviri soldiers marched noisily and merged in the spaces left by the Alettans to mingle in a dual guard of honor. Two imposing men appeared first. They wore Colviri uniforms but didn't have the three cords denoting military ranks. One had flaming red hair, cascading in soft curls, held back by minute braids over his temples. He had Rezzu's eyes. Or Rezzu had his, since the redheaded man was clearly older.

The other man had the white Colviri hair, long and glossy, but there was something about him that was brutal and enticing at the same time, like a fabulous beast who had decided to be nice to you for its own particular reasons. They parted to help a girl with the stairs. She was at least a head shorter than them, still tall by normal human standards. Beautiful and formidable, her resemblance to Rezzu was uncanny. She didn't wear a uniform but a dress that was layers upon layers of dreamily fluid material, like translucent gauze that delicately moved, swayed by its own ethereal breeze. If she were Alettan, Max would have said she was using magic to create that effect.

She walked between the two men, and no one could deny she was their daughter. Even her hair seemed to be a mixture of fire and snow. Her smile was sunny and disarming, and she bestowed it upon all with equal relish. Behind them, two dark-haired humans dressed in morning coats, one of deep green and the other of dark, handsome blue surrounded by four younger versions of them, two boys and two girls (all regal, similar to princes and princesses of fable), followed the guests' procession.

Max couldn't pay more attention to the other people descending because the striking, tall red-haired human had just stopped in front of him and offered his hand.

"My father Darien," Rezzu voiced. They shook hands. "My father Kekoa." More handshaking. "And this beautiful lady is my sister Keda Enoa, future queen of Mireeh."

Before Max could take her hand to kiss it, the sister jumped at him and hugged him, shaking him and leaving him breathless. "*Tisvo Meha!* He is soooo cute, Rezzu!"

"*Keda, Max kovon acu londalul,*" cooed Darien in Colviri, then remembered where he was and added in common language. "You don't want your brother to become a widower before he's a husband."

*Why didn't I take Rezzu on his offer of that learning helmet? I need to speak Colviri a.s.a.p.*

Keda Enoa let Max go but pinched his cheek "Then he wouldn't be a widower in the first place, right?" She pulled one of the fable princess girls as their group had gotten closer. "This is my cousin Lia." She made them shake hands quickly. "Come on, let's see the hot politicians!" She towed her cousin, and behind her a retinue scurried to keep pace with them.

Max was still trying to stop his spinning head but focused enough to say, "Your sister is going to be queen, but you're not a prince?"

Kekoa patted Max's shoulder. "It's a long story. We'll discuss it over dinner. I'm surprised Rezzu hadn't bragged about it."

"He's not the bragging type," said the man with the dark blue morning coat.

"My uncle, Sule Aquinas, regent of Nova Gaia," introduced Rezzu. "And my other uncle, Alaric Sarong, co-regent of the planet." He pointed at the other man, who smiled cheekily as he shook Max's hand.

"Among other things," Alaric's eyes shone brightly. Then he pulled his remaining kids to present them. "Well, you met Lia. This is my oldest, Sulric." The grey-eyed adolescent had the same mischievous bright smile. "Eala," he addressed the girl with green eyes. "And Ronas, the yongest." The boy took Max's hand with a shy grin and almost watery blue eyes. "We'll move so you can meet the rest of the family." And they took off as the Welcome Committee closed in on them with much bowing and effusiveness.

Darien extended his hand to introduce the three men approaching, a burly redhead between two Colviri. "My brother Ben and his two husbands, Tyke and Sun." The massive trio said their hellos and carried on to allow Rezzu's rowdy Academy friends to introduce themselves, amid wolf whistles and cat calls. There were eleven (six men and five women) but seemed like a hundred.

Two priests in outfits that resembled more armor than religious clothes were next. Aletta didn't have an official religion, everyone was allowed to believe whatever they wanted as long as they didn't force others to believe the same, and thus there were no official temples, and union ceremonies (if wanted) were officiated by the oldest member of the uniting families. Legal documentation of the union was signed before a judge by appointment. Max was happy to give Rezzu a wedding ceremony under the Colviri rites. To him, the definitions of miracle and faith were manifested every time he looked into those solar eyes.

With the Colviri, it was really difficult to assess age, thus the two priests could be either forty or four hundred. What made them prominent above everything else was their shaved heads. Both were unknown to Rezzu, so they introduced themselves: Dre-Teemu Kelai and Dre-Doste Maken. They patted Rezzu and Max's hands in the way venerable old men would and moved amid the Welcome Committee toward the transports waiting for the entire party to take them to the Palace of Government.

"That's about it," summarized Kekoa. "If anyone wanted to take out the two planets this would be the perfect occasion." He snickered.

"Father," said Rezzu almost but not quite embarrassed.

Max didn't say anything but he understood the sentiment. They walked to the carriages. He saw Keda Enoa and Lia giggling coquettishly with two young representatives from Perselia and Vimilia in their carriage. He was sure the future queen would be delighted to learn that one of the cities had part of her name in its name, if she didn't know already.

Anatolia had been festooned to receive her off-planet guests, and people were on the streets waving flags and welcoming banners or throwing flowers from windows and balconies. The Nova Gaians and Colviri waved from their carriage windows happily in return. Max's parents awaited them at the palace entrance to meet the in-laws.

"See, that wasn't so bad?" Rezzu pushed Max with his shoulder, during a quiet moment after all the representatives had left and only the wedding party remained in an impromptu informal gathering.

Both families had bonded easily. Max looked around. Peggy Maitheas showed a complicated pass with her wand to Darien and Kekoa under the loving gaze of her husband. The twins, Sasta and Amhara had two Academy friends by their necks in identical headlocks to the applause of that raucous group. Iontach was certainly discussing interplanetary trade with Alaric and Sule, holding Festa, his wife, by the waist as usual, and his handlebar mustache undulating happily as he spoke. The Nova Gaian fable princesses, Keda Enoa, and his cousin Meidhre chirped and giggled like a bunch of colorful, tiny birds, surely talking boys. Deas, the regents' boys, Trom, and Rezzu's uncle Ben and his husbands had formed a circle and were discussing only-universe-knew-what because there were sparks and balls of light emanating from their area. The big surprise was Fiore, who was in a corner with two Colviri from the Academy group, a man and a woman. They were giving him enticing looks and touching his face and hair in a very let's-go-and-do-the-nasty manner.

Max snorted, apparently his brother's luck had come from a different planet, just as his. Rezzu stared at him quizzically. He hadn't answered Rezzu's previous comment, so he pointed at Fiore and agreed. "No. Not bad at all."

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## 15. BEGINNINGS

Finally, their wedding night.

After the proposal (first with one thing and another and later when they had set a date), they agreed to not have sex to make this night more special. Thus, Max was having a big case of blue-turning-purplish balls after twenty standard days of abstinence. Seeing Rezzu move around the room (his long hair the only thing covering that insanely hot body), taking flames from candles with his wand and making them float to create a seductive atmosphere was disgustingly atrocious torture. Amid his sexual suffering, he had to admit Rezzu had become very adept at handling the magic of the planet; he was extremely grateful that this new-found ability had influenced positively in his husband's agreement for them to stay on Aletta. Not that his confirmation as official ambassador hadn't helped to seal the deal.

"Love, do you like it?" Rezzu turned his entire body to look at Max, leaving his wand on top of a darkwood chest of drawers. His massive Colviri cock was hard and ready and dripping.

*Of course I like it!*

*Oh, he's talking about the lights...*

"I do." Max extended his hand, inviting Rezzu to their bed.

The floating flames illuminated Rezzu's hard planes, casting delicious shadows and highlighting rocky muscles and supple ivory skin. A wicked grin flourished on striking features; Rezzu shook his head. "I have a better idea." Rezzu moved toward the window. The panes were closed to guard from the cold breeze but the curtains were drawn. He knelt, and the myriad stars shone shyly over the dark sky, framing beautifully his glowing hair. He opened his arms. "Come here, husband of mine." And his husky voice tugged at Max's nipples and balls and cock but primordially at his heart.

Almost in a trance, Max crawled from the bed and forced his brain to organize moving parts to reach Rezzu. Currents of lust mixed with happiness and appreciation zapped his body as one foot moved in front of the other, his need jutting forward, a steel obelisk guiding that short and dizzying journey.

Big hands welcomed his hips with trailing, whispering fingers. Rezzu kissed the tip of his cock, electric shocks speeding through Max's shaft to ignite goose

bumps all over his body. A groan that was groveling plea mated with urgent order escaped him. His knees decided to tremble, and Max steadied his crumbling body by resting his hands on broad shoulders. The velvety heat tide advancing over his manhood made his hole twitch—burning with anticipation, brimming with expectation.

Deft digits spread his cheeks in tandem with a skillful throat closing around his glans. Eyes shut to focus on the pleasure, Max threw his head back. A sliver of consciousness reminded him not to put extreme pressure on his clutching of Rezzu's shoulders to avoid damaging him with his brass hand. But it was hard, truly hard not to let his control be loosened and just flow—led by the potent, swirling sensations, flying in and out of him.

Max warred with his neurons to produce words, "If... you keep doing this... I'm going to... come... and-and I *seriously* want you... to fuck me."

Rezzu shook his head, surely chuckling, still full of Max's cock in his mouth, pulling like a dog fighting with a stubborn piece of meat. Happy sounds ascended from Max's crotch area, and he had to bring his head forward to see what was happening. Their eyes met; there was nothing but wicked amusement in Rezzu's.

Slowly, deliberately, Rezzu let Max's cock slide from his lips. He straightened his body, his mouth over Max's skin trailing his progress upward. Max shivered. A kiss on Max's neck signaled the end of Rezzu's progression. Firm hands moved him to face the window, and Rezzu placed himself behind him, their shapes flush—their relievos becoming one.

The warmth of Rezzu's body seeped into Max's, and he whined when that comfort disappeared. It was rapidly replaced by rained pecks, quick and furtive, that made him jump and snicker. The soft assault continued downward until teeth replaced lips over Max's ass cheeks, immediately followed by Rezzu's face buried between those same cheeks.

"Oh my..."

"Hold the windowsill," was the only warning before Rezzu lifted him, positioning Max's thighs over his shoulders in a bizarre mockery of a wheelbarrow race.

Max yelped. "What are you doing?" He laughed, gripping the sill for dear life. Then he understood as Rezzu's face was again between his cheeks, the pressure of two fingers (probably forefinger and thumb by the ghost of other

digits in the periphery) exposed his hole, giving better access to his husband's ministrations. His cock was pulled down and stroked, basically milked, and Max felt embarrassed and excited, both sentiments taunting and tickling each other equal to merry lovers having a roll in the literal hay.

His forehead found the cold pane with a muffled thud. Max moaned and squirmed. Rezzu rimmed him relentlessly and used his own precum to help with the handling of Max's cock. The action was surreal and weird and flawless, and nothing (truly nothing) would have been able to prepare Max for the absurdity, for the perfectness of it all.

A few minutes of tongue, teeth, and lips over his hole, and, suddenly, before he could assimilate the fast and precise maneuver turning his world upside down, Max was in Rezzu's arms, facing him—folded like a hand fan, his knees grazing his nipples, his back flush against the window. "Whoa, a little warning next time!" He guffawed and punched Rezzu on the shoulder, "It's Wedding Night, not Acrobatic Deluge at the circus!"

"You don't like it?" Rezzu grinned, his eyes mere slits as he pushed forward rhythmically, his cock teasing Max's pucker.

"Like it? I fucking love it! Give me a nudge or something next time, that's all. Now put that dick in me and make me see real stars..." Max tried to launch his ass forward to meet Rezzu's glans, but he was pinned to the limit.

Rezzu arched an eyebrow, his expression becoming wickeder by the second. "What is that phrase in common language? Your wish is my command?"

"You can say it in *analog progression* if you want, just FUCK ME ALREADY."

The swift penetration was blinding. Inch after inch entered like a blazing sword, and Max's cry was delicious pain, exquisite torture, wonderful acceptance. Rezzu found his tempo quickly, releasing some of the pressure over Max's body. Never one to be outdone, his dormant inner acrobat lowered his hands to the sill and pushed his body forward. Rezzu allowed it, and soon they were imitating a pendulum, their shapes swinging and clashing methodically, kindling a mad fire that would soon consume them on the altar of their honeymoon.

Max could use magic to help him stay afloat—in that precarious little balance between his strong grip on the windowsill and the place where his body was connected to Rezzu's, but all he wanted and needed were those solid hands

grasping his hips, steering him, owning him, taking them to their climax with the determination of a conqueror ready to finish the siege of a fabulous city full of riches.

“You’re going to fuck me,” Rezzu blurted as his motions became erratic.

“W-What?” The fog surrounding Max’s senses made it hard to understand Rezzu’s words.

“You’re... going... to... fuck... me... arghhhhh.” And Rezzu came with a final stab, gushing inside Max, his grip painful and delirious, his head thrown back in a long howl of desperate pleasure.

Out of his control, Max’s own jets flew as if shoved out by Rezzu’s explosion inside him. His cock hadn’t been touched since he was facing Rezzu, and the potency of this no-hands orgasm was absurd, simply overwhelming. Rope after rope covered his metallic abs, his chest, some even landed on his chin and lips. “That was...” He panted. “I have no words.”

Still hard inside Max, Rezzu leaned forward to lick semen from his chin, heaving slightly. He murmured softly. “We don’t need words to know.” He slid out of Max and helped him regain his feet. “Now it’s my turn to see real stars... and perhaps some comets.”

His sweet ambassador had come to play, and Max knew exactly how to make this side of Rezzu feel at home. The magic was there, toe-to-toe with them, and in no time their bodies would be reenergized and raring to go.

Max took Rezzu’s face with both hands and gave him a long languid kiss, an agreement, a promise of stars and comets and supernovas. Rezzu rested his cheek on the mechanical palm when their kiss ended, his eyes hooded, endearing. Max let his hands trail down slowly, almost tentatively to lead Rezzu backward by his waist toward their forgotten bed, their steps easy over thick rugs.

Rezzu lay on his back, his legs spread in an inviting, upward arch on the edge of their plush playground. Max knelt to be close to the pink treasure that winked as if aware of its future, or perhaps calling it to come faster. He rubbed his brass thumb over the delicate puckered skin, and Rezzu moaned encouragingly, both their cocks solid like ancient monoliths.

Every particle of his being screamed, “Pierce. Conquer. Take.” But his heart, separate and still ruling, decided to go slow, to relish every second and make it last. He wet his thumb and leisurely breached the unguarded threshold.

Rezzu was practically addicted to his brass fingers, and his delight was audible and extremely arousing.

A few standard minutes of the wetting-and-thumbing operation, and Rezzu was demanding (in clipped tones) to be fucked or else. Max snicker-snorted, "I need time to recuperate."

Rezzu pushed his head from where it tossed over the midnight covers, eyes narrowed and blazing. "Such a bad liar... a disgrace to diplomacy all over the galaxy."

Max spanked one of those delicious pale cheeks. "You know what the punishment for insulting a diplomat is on this planet?"

Long, white tresses swayed in slow motion as Rezzu confirmed his lack of knowledge.

"Denial of fucking," Max stated casually as he moved away from the bed.

"You wouldn't."

"I could."

A suffering groan emerged from Rezzu, "*Ufel*, darling, you wouldn't leave your husband un-fucked on his wedding night..."

His best diplomatically aloof face surged forward without thinking. "It's an absolute possibility, *Ambassador*, especially if you're calling me a bad liar." But with the last two words he simply couldn't hold it any longer and started laughing as he stroked his cock. He returned to the bed and rubbed his leaking head on that willing orifice. "You want this?" he asked twice. Rezzu nodded furiously. "Yours then." And with a single thrust (just like Rezzu had done with him) he went all the way in. Scorching flesh engulfed his burning shaft.

The second course of their only-universe-knew-how-many-plates wedding feast began.

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*Months later...*

***STEPPED ON YOUR WAND? DOG ATE IT? CONFUSED?***

***STRICTLY CONFIDENTIAL WANDLESS TEST.***

***CONTACT YOUR LOCAL WANDMAKERS ASSOCIATION.***

Rezzu chuckled as the enormous lettering sluggishly and continuously scrolled over the golden blimp. "I think it is genius."

“Do you really?”

“Of course. What could make the people more at ease than the wandmakers promoting wandless magic wielding knowledge?”

“I wasn't sure if I could convince them. That's why I didn't tell you about it.”

“We're not supposed to have secrets between us.” Rezzu wagged his forefinger at Max. “But I'm going to chalk this one to governmental duties, so it's moot.” He took his cup and sipped the fragrant herbal tea. They sat in a cafe in Villu Square, facing the statue of Villu Bettencourt, who was the first to analyze the properties of the planet's magic and found the way to master it, opening the way for it to become their most precious energy. Each day at six in the morning, a different citizen came and enchanted seven colorful orbs representing the city-states to make them swirl around the statue in a magnificent imitation of a planetary system.

“A little mystery never hurt,” Max offered after he put down his own cup.

“You only get mysterious when you are up to something you shouldn't be doing,” Rezzu commented casually, his eyes on the people sauntering about the square: nannies with children in strollers, couples of all ages hand in hand, old ladies walking their miniature dogs. Colviri and Alettans mingled easily. It was interesting how the Colviri settled on Aletta had influenced so much in the fashion sense of the planet, and the rigidity of the waistcoat-coat combo was progressively disappearing; something that hadn't happened on Nova Gaia even after more than two standard decades. His gaze kept wandering back to the little kids though. Today was a special day for them; they had an appointment at Conception Center.

“*Annaxuffo onviteto Meha*, Am I transparent or what? I don't know how I survive diplomacy.” Max patted Rezzu's hand and grinned. “Shall we?”

Max was only transparent to Rezzu, and that was because they were united by a bond that was lost to words. Rezzu beamed at his husband; Max had learned Colviri and now and then peppered their common language conversation with some imaginative phrase. “It's a short distance. We can enjoy the weather while we walk there.”

“Brilliant idea.” Max made a walking signal with two fingers at their driver, strategically located on an opposite corner with other carriages. Byron tipped his hat in acknowledgement. “Come on.” They went to their feet, and greeted people as they strolled toward The One Thousand Plaza, a short block away.

It was a beautiful morning with a balmy breeze and an almost cloudless sky. They admired the tall, handsome buildings along the way, their uncanny resemblance with the Belle Époque Architecture of Nova Gaia a silent reminder of their newly discovered heritage.

Puppies wrestling in a pet shop window halted them for several standard minutes. Max's melodious laughter never failed to arouse something that was vulnerable and lethal inside Rezzu; two sides of a marvelous feeling, fueled by love and happiness.

Rezzu hoped their first child had Max's pale green eyes: the color of the sky of the home he left for the place where he belonged.

Max, apparently able to read the meaning of the adoration on Rezzu's face, blurted, "By Meha, I'm ordering all *my* swimmers to make our child have *your* eyes." He drew his wand and waved it toward his crotch.

They never stopped laughing until they reached their destination.

**The End**

## Glossary

*Colviri words always have the strongest accent on the first syllable.*

Dre: The title of a Colviri priest, the equivalent of Padre or Father.

Rezzu: It doesn't have a literal translation from the Colviri, but it's something similar to 'equal parts'.

Annauk: It's the equivalent of the name Brian in Colviri.

Kecoswe nurguvaek: It means *I'm beyond salvation*.

Ketoza Uvlose: It means *I shouldn't have done it*.

Kirsuber: Icelandic—cherry

Fusdulatex : similar to *sons of bitches*. (The X sound at the end means it's plural.)

Ukwosu: It's the equivalent of the name Angelique in Colviri.

Vudacus Muselet, kefo dulovo vellodde: It means *Captain Muselet, I don't think it is appropriate*.

Govekor dosallepe: It means *go with the redhead*.

Dulok oneh ubbukeh eulu!: It means *stop those ships now!*

Tisvo Meha!: It means *Sweet Meha!*

Keda, Max kovon acu londalul: It means *Enoa, Max needs to breathe*.

Annaxuffo onviteto Meha: It means *Meha's bright shield*

Ufel: It means *love* (a term of endearment in the way one might say *baby*).



## Author Bio

*Born a Sagittarius in the fabulous year of the Rooster of '69, at the hour when his cat was about to become a complete dragon, Gabbo de la Parra landed on the Caribbean Coast of the outlandish Republic of Panama to start the adventure of Life.*

*Love and the Internet brought him to Middle Tennessee to embrace the American Dream and his husbandly romance. Writing has been an important part of his life since a very early age, and it's a pleasure to share his stories with others thanks to the wonderful opportunities this land provides. He is the author of the Spaniards series, Septima Luna and other titles available through Amazon, Barnes & Noble and Smashwords.*

*Gabbo cherishes Life with a southern gentleman in a townhouse close to a lake, crowded with the spirits of his characters and their pets: black esoteric kitty, Luna; white emo-twink Maltese, Chance; and street smart Russian Blue, Bella.*

*His novel Another Dawn on Planet X (love child of his two stories for Love is Always Write) will come to your e-reading devices in Summer 2014 and The Pompeiiian Horse in Autumn 2014.*

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